POLARISATION AND DIALOGUE IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

Summary of the international sessions of the conference cycle

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ICIP

Summary of the international sessions

The political mobilisation regarding highly divisive matters has been translated into a growing polarisation of the societies we live in, as well as a questioning of the fundamental pillars of our political systems. Antagonistic ideological projects presently generate a growing confrontation in societies where we see new divisive lines, due to socioeconomic disparities, migrations, the rejection of traditional political institutions or territorial fitting.

Very often, these divisive dynamics revert to an oversimplification of increasingly more complex realities, in the form of populism, and can derive in processes of involution that put at risk the basis of liberal democracies. More and more, the serene and constructive debate between antagonistic political positions becomes the first victim in a climate of constant polarisation. Confrontation grows and deliberation sees itself reduced. The democratic quality of our societies and institutions degrades and, as such, the possibility of progress in constructive dialogues which effectively address the population´s actual concerns. Despite the existence of dialogue mechanisms and initiatives, even in the most polarised societies, these are often made invisible by the most polarising dynamics.

Polarisation and dialogue in the United Kingdom has been chaired by **Míriam Juan-Torres**, senior researcher at *More in Common* and **Brian Gormally**, director of the *Committee on the Administration of Justice*.

When analysing polarisation, it is necessary to distinguish between thematic polarisation and affective polarisation. This difference, present in every society, is the one we find between the polarisation regarding a particular topic (United Kingdom's Brexit, for example) and polarisation between social groups, and which is translated into a growing "mental" distance between its members. This last polarisation is the one which is potentially the most divisive for societies.

The two most polarising issues in the United Kingdom have been, lately, Brexit and immigration. Both issues have concealed social consensus regarding less divisive matters, such as the defence of public healthcare or gender, while they have hidden gaps such as age (intergenerational conflict) or territorial disputes (between London and the rest of the country). Meanwhile, Brexit has triggered territorial debates that link Scottish or Northern Irish self-determination to EU membership.

On the other hand, one of the existing dialogue mechanisms in British society are the initiatives called "citizens' assemblies" (See Annex). The basic idea is that there is a percentage of the society which is not polarised (or which could decide, when given the chance, not to contribute to polarisation) but is invisible, since polarised debates claim all the media attention. The "citizens' assemblies" want to give a voice and visibility to those citizens who, especially on a local level, do not want to contribute to the polarisation of their society.

One of the frameworks that have also allowed political dialogue and debate in Northern Ireland are the discussions, based on equality and human rights, making it easier for all parties to identify themselves with depolarisation mechanisms, while references of "empty nationalisms", meaning, based on the promise of alternative futures without any concrete content, have led to less constructive dynamics.

The sessions on **Italy** took place with the interventions of **Paola lo Cascio**, history professor at the Universitat de Barcelona and of **Eva Giovannini**, journalist and writer at Rai TV.

The Italian case exemplifies the relationship between polarised societies and institutionally weak governments. Italy has had 65 governments over the last 73 years, making governmental fragility the standard. There are several circumstantial causes which have managed to make governments fall (as, for example, Matteo Renzi´s failed referendum), but internal divisions and struggles inside political parties have been one of the structural causes of Italy's governmental weakness. In most democratic societies, political parties have consolidated themselves as one of the main actors of the system and public life. However, in Italy, they have contributed to the system's instability and the polarisation of society.

The 5 Star Movement (M5E) has ended up being part of two governments and found difficulties when having to combine its anti-system claims with government participation. As a result, its institutional weakness has managed to contribute to a more polarised society.

However, movements which have decided not to integrate themselves in the political system, have also found difficulties in defining political alternatives (the Sardines, see Annex).

In a post-democratic era (as written by Colin Crouch), changes happen very fast, and enthusiasm for the future can turn rapidly into pessimistic nostalgia and, ultimately, anger. This feeling has often been used by populists of all political colours, also by Matteo Salvini, in order to generate polarisation. Dialogue mechanisms need to project a vision of the future and build a narrative that allows to overcome the most polarising issues, on the basis of common democratic values.

Now there is also the risk of political parties wanting to seize movements like the Sardines, in order to instrumentalise them. With personality and by creating their own space, the Sardines and other grassroot movements can find a way to interact with the political system and promote in this way spaces for dialogue.

The third session, concerning the **United States**, coincided with the peak of the Coronavirus pandemic, the murder of George Floyd and the polarising dynamics, represented by Donald Trump. This session counted with the participation of **Pau Solanilla**, associate senior consultant at *Ideograma*, and **Julia Roig**, president of *Partners Global* in Washington DC.

In the case of the United States, the presidency of Donald Trump is a symptom, not a cause, of a polarisation that has been growing over the last 25 years. During this time, the

American society, and especially the republican political base, has been polarised up to the point of triggering an identarian reaction against globalisation and immigration. Now, this polarisation has coincided with a "cultural war", aiming at eliminating the opponent. In this polarisation and "cultural war", language has become key. Sarah Palin's *Tea Party* perceived moderation as weakness, and the alt-right, together with supremacist, racist and anti-feminist sectors, has turned political incorrectness into a political strategy the president himself has exploited.

In order to overcome polarisation, we need to understand that people have multiple identities, and that these are not fixed. The creation of inclusive identities instead of divisive identities is key to promote dialogue. We also need to take into account that, in polarised societies, everybody plays a role, as described by Bart Brandsma (*Understanding the Dynamics of Us versus Them*, see Annex): the instigators (those who benefit), those who let themselves be seduced or convinced, and the silent majorities. The persons, committed to building bridges between extremes, need to focus on the moderate sector or the people who could be confused, and listen to their concerns. Young people and new political regeneration mechanisms can also become effective depolarisation tools (See Annex).

The last international session of the cycle addressed **Covid-19** and its effects on global cooperation. This session was led by **Daniela Schwarzer**, director of the think tank *German Council of Foreign Relations* (*DGAP*) and **Janis A. Emmanouilidis**, director of studies at the think tank *European Policy Centre* (EPC). This session analysed how

polarising trends in which democratic societies have been immersed are accelerated by the pandemic's effects.

The retreat of the United States as founder of liberal international order has made the understanding with Europe more difficult, while also contributing to weaken its fundamental pillars or complicating a joint position towards China. At global level, several political leaders feel themselves under pressure by the management of the pandemic and reinforce their image of internal leadership by looking for scapegoats outside; in the meantime, leaders with authoritarian tendencies take advantage of the situation to increase their domestic control.

The EU has not properly managed the start of the crisis, with control measures in the export of medicines or medical equipment, the closing of the borders and the perception of a lack of solidarity between member states. At global level, the crisis has not been translated into an increase in international cooperation. Even so, cooperation at scientific level can be a positive consequence of the crisis, and the EU is willing to contribute to the creation of a global healthcare system that strengthens multilateral and cooperative dynamics.

However, it is also possible that the EU remains trapped in the rivalry between the USA and China, seeing itself forced to take sides, independently of who wins the November elections in the United States. This would imply that EU's internal cohesion will be put to the test. The crisis can also push the EU towards a phase of introspection, leading to an increase in the polarisation in European societies, in the

division between member states and in authoritarian, nationalist and populist messages.

On the other hand, the polarisation between the USA and China also offers an opportunity for the EU to take up a leading role at global level, making the challenge for the EU to speak with one single voice more obvious. The background roles are played by some multilateral institutions under pressure, as now the World Health Organisation, and some low-activity international cooperation processes, such as the G7 or the G20.

Conclusions

Lately, politically instrumentalised polarisation has been a constant factor in democratic societies: during Brexit, with Salvini and Trump, or between those who, in the middle of the pandemic, feed the fears regarding an uncertain future and take advantage of them to weaken global multilateral cooperation. The phenomenon, however, is not new, but rather has been building up over the recent years.

Polarisation at national scale has also coexisted with polarisation at international scale. Numerous states and agents of the international system project their negative incentives regarding global cooperation and take unilateral decisions. Europe, from its side, has a clear interest in maintaining and strengthening global multilateral cooperation mechanisms, since crises such as Covid-19 demonstrate the need to rely on strong institutions at world level.

One of the main risks of *thematic* polarisation is that it reinforces *affective* polarisation, which boosts the construction of an identity, based on what differentiates one from people who think differently. This phenomenon is highly emotional, deaf for rational arguments and, as such, complicates the mediating task of politics.

There are dialogue tools which can revert the polarisation dynamics, both at national as international level, and also at emotional level:

- When institutions or the laws in force are challenged by important sectors of society, it is necessary to find a framework of standards or values that facilitates dialogue. In Northern Ireland, this framework has been formed by human rights and equality. In the USA, an effort is being made to define a new narrative which calls upon and brings together a society with multiple identities.
- In order to promote dialogue, it is necessary to understand the psychology of the polarised population, adopt a respectful tone, have a capacity for self-criticism, create multiple spaces to conduct the process, and recognise the legitimacy of the other party.
- Polarisation dynamics conceal the diversity that exists in every society. The more positions and agents are represented in a dialogue, the bigger its legitimacy and its capacity to overcome tensions.
- When facing the challenges to orientate a dialogue, there is the need to create new spaces for participation or to focus on constructive political dynamics at different levels. In the United Kingdom

and Italy, citizens' assemblies and forums have been organised to address polarising matters. In Italy, the Sardines movement gathers mostly young people, with an explicit call to fight against racism. In the USA, social and political dialogue especially bears fruit in some municipalities and states which value consultation and reconciliation.

- The Italian and American cases, as well as the present global dynamics, show that, the weaker democratic institutions and multilateral forums are, the more polarisation grows and the space for dialogue at international scale shrinks.
- Therefore, it is vital to reinforce and preserve institutions and local and national democratic standards, as well as international multilateral institutions. If, today, they cannot respond to certain social dynamics and changing policies, a process of inclusive and consensual reforms needs to be studied.

Annex

These are some of the initiatives, mentioned in the CIDOB Briefing nr. 24 to depolarise democratic societies and some which, although they are not mentioned in the document, bring an added value to it.

This list is informative and by no means exhaustive.

United Kingdom

Citizens' Assemblies
    On specific matters

- On [Social Assistance](#)
- On [Climate change](#)
- On [Brexit](#)
- On [how democracy works](#) in the United Kingdom

Of regional nature
- In [Northern Ireland](#), on how polarising issues can be addressed
- In [Wales](#), to debate "Devolution"
- In [Scotland](#), as a tool for the integration of citizens in decision-making

Italy
- [6000 Sardine](#): a citizens' movement, created with the intention of promoting active citizenship as political practice and as antidote against populism.

Netherlands
- [Inside Polarisation](#): a consultancy agency, teaching "midfield" professionals to explore effective positions, recognise their (im)possibilities and establish a (de)polarisation strategy. One of the consultants is the author of *Understanding the Dynamics of Us versus Them.*

United States
- [Better Angels](#): a society, dedicated to the preservation of the United States' history, giving support to all kinds of initiatives that highlight what brings and has brought American society together.
- [Better (Braver) Angels](#): A citizens' organisation which gathers blue and red Americans in an alliance to depolarise the United States.
- [The Depolarization Project](#): A project that saw the light during a course at Stanford University after the 2016 elections, with the objective to help people to listen, learn and lead. They carry out research on strategies that work

and offer training courses for companies, students, communities, and encourage leaders to open themselves up and change their opinion.

<u>At global level</u>
- [The Commons Project](#): A non-profit organisation, aiming at everyone benefitting from technology and data, and staying in control over their digital lives.