

The Community of Democracies: should Europe engage?

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In November the fourth Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies (CD) took place in Bamako, Mali. The event was an important follow-up to the 2005 conference in Chile and brought together several hundred representatives from participating states and a diverse “Non-Governmental Process”.² It included addresses from the Malian President Amadou Toumani Toure (the general who stepped down after ousting Moussa Traore in 1991 and then returned to power in democratic elections) and from the Malian Prime Minister, along with a visit from former French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, representing the Club de Madrid association of former world leaders.

However, the event was minor in diplomatic terms, as most countries sent lower-level representatives (ambassadors instead of ministers), and the document agreed upon had no real teeth. In the media, this was almost a non-event: no echoes in Europe or the United States, and only brief reports in the Malian and other Africa-focused media. Some media followed the regional tour that the US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte was taking in the region, amidst rumours of a new US military base in Africa. Yet they said little about his speech as head of the US delegation at the Community of Democracies - which was itself seen as a step down from the last conference, which was attended by Secretary Rice. So what is the Community of Democracies really about and does it have a future? Should the so-far sceptical Europeans take it more seriously as a multilateral initiative aimed at promoting democracy?

An overly judgmental community?

The CD resembles an international organisation that considers all countries on an equal footing, except that membership is not straightforward, and neither were invitations to the Bamako conference. Countries were either “invited”, “not invited” or invited as “observers” in a highly politicised process that lacked transparency.

The founding Warsaw Declaration was endorsed by more than 100 countries in 2000, including for instance Venezuela and Tunisia, both explicitly excluded at Bamako. In this last conference, 127 countries were invited as full participants and 20 as observers. Seemingly, the United States (informally) vetoed the participation of Venezuela, but required that of Iraq.³ Russia was downgraded to “observer” after intense lobbying (though the International Advisory Committee had recommended outright exclusion) while Afghanistan was a full participant. This makes this

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² About 90 international “civil society representatives” were invited. An indeterminate number of members of Malian NGOs and associations also attended some of the sessions.

³ Iraq was invited as full participant by the Convening Group and Mali, despite the contrary recommendations from the Community of Democracies’ International Advisory Committee.

forum rather peculiar: multilateral but with a changing list of full participants, observers and non-participants depending on an evaluation of national trends of respect for democracy and human rights.

The CD established criteria for participation to judge countries (or rather, governments) and eventually restrict participation. For the Bamako meeting, an International Advisory Committee made up of “an independent group of leading figures from politics, diplomacy and academia” was established to monitor compliance with the criteria set out in the Warsaw Declaration.⁴ Despite the careful analysis compiled by this group, assessing democracy remains a controversial exercise with delicate and subjective assumptions. Ultimately, the invitations process is in the hands of a Convening Group made up of 16 members⁵ and has a logic not dissimilar to that of the UN Security Council, with great-power and regional confrontations, traditional alliances, and (undeclared, but de-facto) veto-players. In addition, the country hosting the conference has an upper hand in the invitations, which is characterised by significant backstage bargaining and diplomacy. The lack of transparency around the meetings and work by the Convening Group has only reinforced the suspicions of sceptical countries, such as France, that the CD remains an unduly politicised forum.

The term “community” seems somewhat out of place, for two additional reasons. Firstly, the community is supposedly *based* on the common value of democracy, while in the CD, despite the rhetoric that surrounds it, these values cannot be assumed but rather are constantly at issue when authoritarian countries claim that they pursue democracy “their own way”. Moreover, there is no official definition of “democracy”: the Declaration criteria are only a vague list of 19 “principles and practices” (mainly elections and human rights), and other surveys (notably Freedom in the World, Bertelsmann Transformation Index and World Bank data) clearly have an influence on the assessment process. Secondly, any community *implies exclusion* vis-à-vis some “other” who is not a member, and it is that difference that is the *raison d’être* of the community itself. On the one hand, if the CD seeks the inclusion of all countries, achieving its goal will be equal to its end: once everybody is a democracy, we no longer need the community. On the other, if exclusion is defended, a certain animosity and hostility towards non-members will always follow, and this may involve counterproductive diplomacy. Whether this has been clearly thought out is doubtful, and this may trigger some negative aspects of “conditionality” relations, similar to what has been seen with EU accession and neighbour/Mediterranean policies. Overall, speaking about a “community” emphasises the rhetorical aspect of the gathering. As it is, “The International Forum for Democracy Promotion” might be a more accurate name.

Non-Western leadership but US guidance?

Another pillar of the CD, linked to the above, is the integration and important role of countries *other* than the United States and Western European countries. There was a strong *symbolic* significance in the fact that the second ministerial conference took place in Seoul, South Korea (2003), the third in Santiago de Chile (2005), and this fourth one in Bamako, Mali. Hosting the events allows the organising states some *discretion over agenda- and priority-setting*, and new insights and themes have thereby been given more weight. It was thus that a focus on regionalism and regional institutions was pushed forward in South America. Rather tellingly, as the conference turned to Africa, the focus shifted to economic development and poverty. Of course, these themes are universal and generally linked to democracy and its promotion, but the emphasis clearly shifted away from topics typically identified with Western promoters.

⁴ This is the description by Thomas O. Melia and Theodore J. Piccone in “Wanted : Genuine Democracies”, *National Post*, July 20, 2007. For a list of members, see http://www.demcoalition.org/2005_html/commu_cdm07.html.

⁵ This group previously included 10, later 14 states. As of 2006, the members were Chile, India, Poland, the Czech Republic, the United States of America, Mali, Mexico, Portugal, South Africa, South Korea, the Philippines, Mongolia, Morocco, El Salvador, Cape Verde, and Italy.

Indeed, there has been less talk about conditionality and aid and many more demands for non-intervention, South-South and regional cooperation, and socio-economic rights and priorities.

The Community of Democracies clearly counts among its leaders India, South Africa and Chile. The government of India, for instance, was among the main funders of the Bamako conference, and a proposal to establish a CD Fund/Bank for Poverty Reduction has been made by the India Habitat Centre and its director. South Africa and Chile, with important representation in Bamako (deputy ministers heading the delegations), also participated very actively in the drafting of the Consensus.

The role of Eastern European countries, especially Poland, and to a certain extent Bulgaria and Romania, has also been significant. After it saw the birth of the initiative - with the important support of former foreign minister Geremek for Madeleine Albright's original plan - Poland will now be in charge of a permanent secretariat in Warsaw as of 2008. Nevertheless, a strong factor behind this leadership is, as Polish diplomats willingly agree, the friendship and sympathy this country has for the United States and American initiatives.

Indeed, the limited visibility of the United States in the Community of Democracies events goes hand-in-hand with its undeniably strong and manifold influence. The US presence is overwhelming in behind the scenes diplomacy, while such US-based independent NGOs as the Democracy Coalition Project and the Council for a Community of Democracies have played a leading role in the organisation's functioning and evolution.⁶ In Bamako, the American presence was not strictly governmental and, as with democracy promotion in general, the CD has by now become a bipartisan enterprise reaching out to corporations and NGOs. The CD project stemmed from Democrat leaders (and associates, notably Georges Soros), but now has significant support from Republicans, too. Both party foundations (the NDI and the IRI) were well represented at the conference. Freedom House, the World Movement for Democracy, and a number of private initiatives were also present staging meetings, dining and networking with officials and lobby-representatives in a way that would not have been out of place on Capitol Hill. The CD includes a lot of American "business as usual" with tangential internationalisation.

This trend was illustrated by the place of honour reserved for the Millennium Challenge Corporation's well-staffed stand, and the speech by its CEO at the opening ceremony. Clearly, the government of Mali wanted to give a visible sign of its thanks for the compact it finally signed to access the Millennium Challenge Account.⁷ Americans had seemingly intended to remain discreet at the conference, yet Ambassador/CEO Danilovich's speech, which followed John Negroponte's, showed that the US still dominates in terms of words and funds. Interestingly, the following day, in one of the thematic round tables, a Malian minister insisted that "there was more in international democracy support than the Millennium Challenge Corporation, as the European Union also provided additional funds and clear support when democratisation exists". The focus thus returned to the big promoters, despite the emphasis on the CD's alternative leadership.

Along these lines, the position and role of France deserve nuanced analysis. In 2000, France had presented a cold shoulder to the CD by attending the conference but refusing to sign the Warsaw Declaration. But in Bamako, the French delegation (headed by the ambassador in Mali), participated actively in the meetings that reviewed the draft of the Consensus. The interventions were often on the detailed wording of the document, notably emphasising the role of human rights in democracy promotion. There might be reason to suspect a renewed interest in the CD - perhaps due to the francophone Africa setting, renewed power-game calculations, and/or the potential France-US rapprochement of the Sarkozy era.

⁶ For more information, see their websites <http://www.demcoalition.org/> and <http://www.ccd21.org/>.

⁷ The generously endowed MCA was created by the Bush administration and notably involves heavy competition for funds (only allocated to selected countries) in a process where democracy (evaluated according to Freedom House and World Bank standards) is an essential condition. The MCC allocated USD 461 million to Mali for the next 5 years.

A non-governmental branch in search of inclusion

The non-governmental presence at the Community of Democracies has grown stronger with time. In Seoul (2002), some NGOs met separately but in parallel to the ministerial meeting and drafted their own proposals, though “the NGO side” of the conference became visible thanks to the actions of some of its representatives. The Non-Governmental Process then gained momentum, from Seoul to Santiago, with regional meetings and vigorous organisation, led by the Chilean NGO Participa. This translated into a positive synergy at the Ministerial Conference - a declaration was presented to the official representatives. Finally, in the run-up to the Bamako conference, the non-governmental input was more fully integrated in the official preparatory meetings, and Mali even provided equivalent protocol at the airport for civil society representatives.

At the conference, civil society representatives actively participated in the thematic and regional roundtables with ministerial delegations.⁸ There was a theoretical limit of five non-governmental representatives in these forums but nobody enforced it, and individuals were also able to attend some governmental “closed-doors” discussions.

As one of the governmental delegates put it in Bamako, the Community of Democracies has “this charm of the non-governmental”, but this does not come without complications. The Non-Governmental Process seeks more inclusion in diplomatic dynamics, joining in the preparation of the conferences, producing a handbook for diplomats,⁹ and advising on the country invitation process. The Process also seeks to build a sort of civil society consensus, coordinating regional-input, and presenting unified recommendations. All this is far from straightforward, and the implications are significant.

Firstly, it is uncertain how much cooperation (and of what kind) should exist between the governmental and the non-governmental projects. Emphasising cooperation involves weakening civil society’s role as a counterpart to government in a democracy, and as an active opponent to autocrats in transitions. As we are seeing in many democratising countries, “civil society” may become a new elite of selected representatives that are empowered by governmental needs, rather than providing the much needed counterpart of wide-ranging, free, critically alert and evolving civic activities. The West also plays an important role in these potentially perverse dynamics.¹⁰ The CD Non-Governmental Process thus risks losing its role of contestation and constructive critique if its activities focus too much on influencing the governmental agenda from the inside.

At the same time, access to the governmental agenda and the conference floor is a powerful tool: Paul Graham, the South African chair of the International NGO Steering Committee, publicly criticised Mali’s exclusion of NGO representatives from Taiwan, which was echoed in the conference reports and in the media (e.g. Reuters).¹¹ This leads to interesting bargaining between governmental and non-governmental members at these high levels. The Non-Governmental Process must thus strike a difficult balance between co-optation in the official forums, and an independent civil society agenda that genuinely opposes non-democratic policies in many of the CD countries and beyond.¹²

⁸ Non-governmental representatives sat together with the governments at the Santiago 2005 Ministerial Conference, but their participation was more active in Bamako discussions. They often took the floor, engaged in dialogue and made specific suggestions.

⁹ A first draft of this handbook, a university think tank-Council for a Community of Democracies project, was distributed at the Bamako conference.

¹⁰ The problems and potential of civil society in democratisation have been under consideration for some years now. See for instance Peter Burnell and Peter Calvert (eds), *Civil society in democratisation*, Frank Cass, 2004 and Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway (eds.) *Funding virtue: civil society in democracy promotion*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000.

¹¹ Mali denied visas to attend the conference to members of the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, presumably in a gesture to China. The issue was subsequently raised at press conferences, which visibly displeased Malian officials.

¹² Civil society representatives from excluded countries, e.g. Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Tunisia, attended the conference.

Secondly, the CD non-governmental input is presented with an artificial sense of unity: there is no such consensus emanating from “civil society”. Moreover, such unity may be the result of internal power dynamics and artificial impositions that could delegitimise the Non-Governmental Process. This process is coordinated and led by an International Steering Committee with the difficult task of strengthening the project and developing some pragmatic contributions, while avoiding the risk of elite domination and policy bias.¹³

Again, some examples illustrate well these tensions. One is the traditional debate on the role of political parties in civil society, with conceptual and pragmatic implications.¹⁴ This debate was lively at the sessions of the Non-Governmental Process in Bamako, and the contrast was striking between some Western representatives defending the inclusion of political parties (most notably the representatives of American and Dutch party foundations), and most African NGO representatives, who denounced their own struggle against abusive, corrupt political parties in their domestic environments. Political party internationals have now been invited to the process, but this shouldn’t obscure the problems of party composition and party behavior that are key in many democratising states and electoral democracies. Other initiatives that were highlighted positively in the International Steering Committee document are also very controversial in their domestic contexts. Two examples are the proposal for a Fund/Bank for Poverty Reduction (based in India), that seems tailored to and dominated by particular individuals, and the creation of a European Foundation for Democracy through Partnership. This latter proposal is not supported by all European party foundations.

Beyond Bamako

All this suffices to demonstrate that some basic issues remain unresolved for the Community of Democracies. A number of factors will determine whether the latter succeeds, merely drifts on ineffectually or sinks into oblivion.

- **Who is what?** Participants, observers, and absent countries. Who participates in the conferences, with which hat (observer or full participant) and who is explicitly excluded is an important tool of the Community of Democracies, but it is difficult to define in objective terms. Firstly, the process of monitoring and invitation is inevitably politicised, and the plans for “professional, technical” assessment, as well as a “neutral” group of experts, are somewhat illusory. Managing this will remain one of the main challenges, and a potential source of criticism of the CD.

Secondly, the logic of inclusion of observers can have perverse effects: at Bamako, Tunisia was “sanctioned” with exclusion, and Egypt and Algeria were “rewarded” as observers. But these “observers” were actually among the most active governmental participants with comments, draft modifications, etc. It is hard to maintain categories in a multilateral forum (and probably for this reason the Malian hosts didn’t implement observer’s rules strictly), but the work and agreements on democracy are then affected.

Thirdly, and more broadly, it is uncertain that the real challenges facing a community of democracies (alternative sources of power and development) are being dealt with in the international political and economic arena. The paradox was clear in Mali: CD representatives en route from the hotel to the conference centre could admire some interesting new constructions in Bamako, eg: a bridge over the River Niger built by the Chinese, and an impressive complex, that will be the new ministerial neighbourhood, erected by generous Libya.

¹³ This Committee is currently composed of 21 members. The membership information put forward by the Malian Secretariat of the Non-Governmental Process is available at http://www.bamakodemocracy2007.org/cdemo/cdemo_eng/ngo_process.php

¹⁴ For example, “do political parties belong to civil society, or is the latter defined by non-governmental aspirations only?”, and “how can they contribute to democratisation?”

- **To develop or to democratise?** As the conference moved from Chile to Mali, the new host focused on economics, and proposed a “Consensus on Democracy, Development and Poverty Reduction”. This comes as no surprise for a democracy that continues to rank 175 (out of 177) in the Human Development Index and last among the 102 countries for which the Human Poverty Index was designed.¹⁵ In the Bamako conference debates and document drafts, poor countries upheld the virtuous link between democracy and development, while acknowledging that they struggle to make this happen in reality.

The focus of Southern countries, mostly in Africa, is still on development. This serves as a reminder of the traditional human rights debate (and separation) between civil-political liberties and socio-economic rights. It is necessary for the West to avoid focusing exclusively on the first, and thereby neglecting the demands of underdeveloped countries, if it is to avoid engendering old Cold War ideological clashes.

Countries such as Brazil insisted on similar economic claims, such as a fairer international trade system and negotiations (including in the World Trade Organisation). While the Community of Democracies could ideally focus on political and civil aspects, international economic trends and realities will continue to be the “universal” priority for both governments and civil society from most parts of the world. Thus, despite the pragmatic difficulties and complex academic debates, it is worth maintaining both development and democracy on the political agenda.

- **Talking or doing?** As an intergovernmental forum, the risk is that the Community of Democracies meetings become yet another talking shop, and that the talk becomes little more than a whisper thanks to the low levels of diplomatic representation. However, organisations trying to keep the CD going, such as the Democracy Coalition Project and the Non-Governmental Process, have undertaken a number of initiatives and some results are already visible, such as the Democracy Caucus and the Democracy Fund in the United Nations, a Hungarian government NGO center working on specific projects (in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus), and the “Diplomat’s Handbook” that provides references and advice for diplomats deployed in democratising countries. These activities may become the subject of suspicion and criticism if they are just “somebody’s” initiative bearing a CD stamp. At the same time, it is difficult to create consensus and to simply have everybody work on everything.

More generally, multilateral democracy promotion is likely to remain limited at the international level. At the conference, governments took very good care to preserve the principles of state sovereignty and of non-intervention in domestic affairs. On one hand, the International Steering Committee of the Non-Governmental Process proposed to create a mechanism to “identify and act upon threats to democracy”. On the other, when drafting the Consensus, governments changed the words “to protect democracy” (in Article 2) for the more politically correct “to support democracy”, thereby thwarting any potential for CD-legitimatised intervention.

- **More Europe?** In the past, the Community of Democracies has explicitly called for stronger European Union (EU) support for future plans.¹⁶ Interestingly, the initiative has received significant support from Eastern European countries: Poland has agreed to host a CD Permanent Secretariat and the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania are active participants. Seemingly, only a few Slovak and Polish Members of the European Parliament have shown clear support for the democratic caucus set up in 2005 and supported by the CD. By contrast, the absence of the European Union and EU heavyweights France, the United Kingdom and Germany in this process has been widely commented upon. Even Sweden and the Netherlands, traditional supporters of pro-democracy policies, have seemed timid in their participation.

¹⁵ http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_MLI.html, data for 2004.

¹⁶ *Community of Democracies – The Evolution of a Movement*, available at <http://www.ccd21.org/team/index.htm>. Website accessed 6 December 2007.

There is little interest - though perhaps some truth - in the perception of a schism between "old Europe" and "new Europe". What is more interesting is that the CD actually divides democracy promoters (the US and the EU) more than it divides transitional countries or non-democracies. In addition, it is noteworthy that at Bamako there was no joint effort or coordination between member states at the EU level whatsoever, despite democracy promotion supposedly being one of the objectives of Common Foreign and Security Policy. It is also significant - and deplorable - that the EU is shunning an initiative in which non-Western voices and proposals have the floor. After all the EU talk about multilateralism and partnership, disregarding such a democracy forum is simply counterproductive. Seemingly, the EU is dissatisfied with the American leadership in the CD, but this argument is weak. If it were the case, it would be more constructive to have clear EU opposition and efforts to reinforce "true" multilateralism and partnership. As things stand, the EU will hear strong criticism of its leadership and "true" principles from countries in the European Neighbourhood Policy, ACP development cooperation, etc.

With the establishment of the CD Permanent Secretariat in Poland, and the official hosting of the next Ministerial Conference in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2009, Europe will receive an important opportunity to increase the CD's clout and credibility. The issue should at least make the agenda of the Council and some EP Committees. Discrepancies should be discussed, and political cooperation in foreign affairs deepened. With regard to the Non-Governmental Process, NGO and party foundations from the Netherlands, Romania, the United Kingdom and Italy have joined, but the German Stiftungen have been reluctant: the debate on their role and a joint European initiative is open. In any case, it is also necessary to start integrating European NGOs at a broader level, especially those with strong North-South partnerships already following European ACP policies and the Barcelona Process, if the CD is to have more inclusive and legitimate civil society participation.

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