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Autor(es): Oliveira, A. Sofia Pinto; Leão, Anabela; Quintas, Ana Isabel; Freitas, Daniel; Almeida, Pedro

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Empowerment and the Future of Democracy: The affirmation of citizen's power at a slow pace

A.Sofia Pinto Oliveira, PhD

Universidade do Minho

E-mail: aspo@direito.uminho.pt

Anabela Leão, PhD

Universidade do Porto - Faculdade de Direito

Email: aleao@direito.up.pt

Ana Isabel Quintas, LLM

Universidade do Minho

E-mail: anaisabequintas@hotmail.com

Daniel Freitas, MSc

Universidade do Porto

E-mail: danielfreitas9@gmail.com

Pedro Almeida, PhD

Universidade do Porto

E-mail: palmeida@direito.up.pt

This short report¹ is based on a study on one of the main global trends identified during the last decades: the empowerment of individuals. It has two goals: on the one hand, we will try to summarize the contributions of about 20 specialists, who spoke during the Serralves Conferences, leaving a written testimony of what was said. On the other hand, we

¹ This article is a shorter version of our contribution to the written notes of the Serralves Conferences, that will be edited and published in Portuguese soon.

will present some reflections on the possible futures of Portugal and on the way in which we, the Portuguese people, can participate in the development of this trend and which future, that is, which kind of "alternative scenarios", we can expect in 2030.

Right from the beginning, on the first conference on 28th of September 2015, ÁLVARO VASCONCELOS, curator of these conferences and coordinator of the *EUISS*² study "Global Trends 2030: Citizens in an Interconnected and Polycentric World", explained the nature of this trend and its key drivers.

The empowerment of citizens is the result of significant changes of the world as, for example, the slow disappearance of extreme poverty and illiteracy; the rise of a middle class (which's influence will increase on equal terms with its growing number, which is estimated in 3.2 billion in 2020 and 4.9 in 2030) with access to means of subsistence and education; with women participating in the labour market and having a voice in the public domain; the major part of the population partaking in the information society, with access to the internet and to means of mass communication (it is estimated that, in 2030, more than half of the world's population has access to the internet) and, therefore, to sources of information that impels it to participate in the decision making process as far as they are concerned. These people do not see themselves as addressees of politics, but claim the right to have a voice to be heard in the political decision making process.

It is only just a little bit more than ten years to 2030, but the uncertainties are huge by now. Unpredictability is not just one of the factors to be considered, but it is the only certainty which one can count on (ÁLVARO DE VASCONCELOS, Inaugural Conference on the 28th of September 2015).

In September 2015, when the Serralves Conferences started, it was already clear that the traditional political actors at EU level showed themselves unable to deal with the great challenges with which they are confronted – this was particularly evident regarding the "refugee crisis" or, more correctly speaking, the political failure to anticipate, prevent and manage the forced movements of populations which were foreseeable years ago.

In June 2016, when we finished these Conferences under the shock of the United Kingdoms highly participated referendum to leave the EU (Brexit), we were aware that it had never been more complicated to make predictions on possible future scenarios for the next decade.

² EUISS, *Global Trends 2030. Citizens in an Interconnected and Polycentric World*, Paris, 2011, available at < URL: http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/ESPAS_report_01.pdf> ISBN: 978-92-9198-199-1; DOI: 10.2815/27508 [10.12.2016]. , p. 11 ff., which we follow herein very closely. For further developments, see p. 27 ff.

During the ten Conferences, empowerment was approached in different ways by different participants. Addressing the topic from different perspectives, the participants referred to a common feeling of disappointment in the western world with democracy and with the globalisation process.

During the conference on 9th of November 2015, MATTHEW BURROWS reported in a very particular way on the “*Economic Trends in Polycentric World: Social Justice and Effective Governance or Globalization at risk?*”, when he spoke about the expectations raised by the globalization which were crippled by the evolution during the last years.

The element that MATTHEW BURROWS identified as most alarming and most subversive to the positive global trends are the prevailing conflicts – at international, but most of all at national level – at a scale that, some years ago, was unthinkable. ANTÓNIO GUTERRES noted as well that a polycentric world is getting confused with a chaotic world, in which it is neither possible to discern the existence of forces able to prevent and stop conflicts nor the capacity to hold states responsible for its actions – especially what concerns the responsibility to protect (R2P) the victims of persisting and increasing conflicts.

With great impact on our topic – the empowerment of individuals – MATTHEW BURROWS made it clear, that there is a perception that we are getting closer and closer by the means of social networks and information. But information and communication technologies made it also possible for nationalistic and racist ideas to reach a new and broader expression, a stronger cohesion and support. Contrary to expectations, the new information and communication technologies did not lead to a better global understanding and did not contribute to a better mutual understanding of nations. National and religious identities were being reinforced and took a stand against global citizenship.

The optimistic approach to globalization, presented by Pedro Dallari during the first Conference, and the positive argument on behalf of new technologies, that was present in the second session by JOSÉ MANUEL FONSECA DA MOURA was toned down in the following sessions.

Coming back to the intervention of MATTHEW BURROWS, another disturbing factor of the empowerment of individuals is the insecurity on the labour market, which has a strong impact on – but not only – the younger generations in western countries, especially in the European and American middle class. Among citizens of the western democracies we can find the perception – even if wrong – that the precarity on the labour market is due to globalization, in which it is impossible to compete with countries with cheap manual labour

and which increases migratory pressure, that, on its side, endangers jobs in the target countries.

There is also the factor of the digital revolution, which was discussed during the session on “*Global Technological Trends: Contributing to a Better World?*”, on 15th of October 2015, which aggravates these volatility of jobs, creating a tremendous discomfort in society. This was intensified by rigorous budgetary policies which, in some cases like Portugal – justified or not – were applied within a short period, causing insolvency of companies, reducing domestic consumption, diminishing job opportunities and provoking emigration waves to an extent that we thought would never be seen again.

The explosion of the middle class did not signify a strengthening of democracies and its classic means – on the contrary, we assisted a generalized disappointment of citizens regarding politics and the democratic system itself, which resulted in high abstention rates.

This mismatch between traditional mechanisms of democratic representation and citizens’ demands was addressed during the Conference on 30th of November with RENATO JANINE RIBEIRO and GUILHERME D` OLIVEIRA MARTINS. The rising inequalities within societies threatens power and challenges its legitimacy – not the legitimacy of its source, but the legitimacy of exercise, that comes from its orientation on the defence of common welfare and of the public interest, as pointed out by GUILHERME D` OLIVEIRA MARTINS.

During the last Conference on 20th April "the weakening of the vote" and "the crisis of representative democracy" re-emerged and showed the necessity to deal with this topic not just on a national, but on a global level. This was stressed by PAULO RANGEL, who noted that the political crisis is not just a national crisis, but a global one, that is linked to the crisis of the modern state and to the deterritorialization of democracies and power. Will the future of democracy mean the overcoming of the “democracy of vote” by the “democracy of rights” (like PAULO RANGEL suggested)?

The dialogue between ÁLVARO DE VASCONCELOS e de MARIA JOÃO RODRIGUES suggested that the strengthening of citizens’ participation must be done not just at national level but also at European level. The goal could be a stronger transnational democracy, as suggested by RUI TAVARES.

On 29th of June 2015, during the round table, that marked the end of the Serralves Conferences, ISABEL PIRES DE LIMA stressed the urgent need of an education for democratic citizenship, promoting the civic participation of the citizens. Without participation, there is no democracy, but without education there is no possibility to participate, due to the absence of prior information and civic training. LUÍSA SCHMIDT referred the need and urgency to take the

environmental education seriously, to cultivate the consciousness of the decisive role of environmental issues and to open new perspectives on a green economy.

And in Portugal? What is the impact of this trend of individuals' empowerment? What does it imply in the functioning of democracy?

Empowerment must be analysed in the context of social progress during the last decades, seeing as key drivers the increase of the middle class, the wide access to education and to information and communication technologies and the improved status of women in society.

Considering that the middle class earns between \$ 6.000 - 30.000 per year³, which means between 5.500 € - 27.500 € per year in local currency, according to PORDATA, it might be suggested that, in Portugal, where there are 5 million family units, nearly one in five families (849.358 in 2013) does not reach a gross income of 5.000 €. Since 2011 this number has increased significantly. Around 70 % of the families earned an annual income between 5.000 € and 27.500 €⁴.

The persisting high levels of poverty in Portugal cannot be ignored. Even the middle class in Portugal is *squeezed and without any hope*, according to TERESA DE SOUSA, who was moderator at the Conference held on 30th of November 2015.

Related to the empowerment drivers of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), as far as Portugal is concerned, there is an increased access to these means, specially to the Internet, being Portugal however below the European average. Among the EU countries Portugal is with lower penetration of Internet, being just ahead of Greece, Romania and Bulgaria⁵.

³ The Report *Global Trends 2030* states: "There are multiple applicable definitions of what constitutes membership in the middle class. The International Futures model that we use in this report focuses on per capita consumption expenditures rather than GDP per capita. In that model, middle-class membership is defined as per capita household expenditures of \$10-50 per day at PPP. **Goldman Sachs used a comparable GDP per capita of \$6,000-30,000 per year**, which yields a similar estimate of 1.2 billion middle-class people in the world in 2010. Kharas (OECD study) calculated the number of those in the middle class at 1.85 billion in 2009; Ravallion (World Bank) calculated that 2.64 billion people were in the middle class in 2005. b The source for this estimate is a 2008 Goldman Sachs study" – NIS, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, 2012, available at < URL: <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/about/organization/global-trends-2030>> [10.12.2016] ISBN: 978-1-929667-21-5.

⁴ Data available at < URL: <http://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Agregados+familiares+por+escal%C3%B5es+de+rendimento+IRS+Modelo+I++2-79>, > [10.12.2016].

⁵ Source: INE, *Sociedade da Informação e do Conhecimento - Inquérito à Utilização de Tecnologias da Informação e da Comunicação nas Famílias*, Lisbon, 2015, available at < URL: https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_destaques&DESTAQUESdest_boui=211422735&DESTAQUESmodo=2&xlang=pt> [10.12.2016].

As far as the status of women is concerned, there is a generalized perception that women, more than men, are successful at educational level, but this is not transposed to the labour market and to the political scene. The available data confirm this perception⁶.

What concerns the functioning of the democratic system there are very alarming data which indicate a depreciation of the traditional forms of political participation – the vote – without being compensated by others means of participation.

According to the data of the INE⁷ political participation in the elections after the democratic Revolution of April 1974 suffered a gradual reduction during the last forty years. The participation in the elections for the European Parliament started at a high level in 1998, but showed a sharp decrease in the following two elections and is reaching minimal levels.

The high abstention was confirmed by the last elections for the national Parliament in which the rates reached 44,1 % in 2015 and 51,3 % in the last Presidential elections – both elections took place at the same time as the Serralves Conferences.

As far as political participation by referendums is concerned, the participation levels are still worse: in the last 3 national referendums, the number of voters did not reach the minimum levels necessary for binding results, according to the Constitution (50 % plus 1 of the registered voters). Therefore, the potential of this mechanism to mobilize democratic life might be doubted.

It is not only in the old western democracies that governments are unable to offer answers to the worries and aspirations of its citizens, but also in states with young democracies, as in Portugal, and in which women, for example, were entitled to general votes only in the last forty years. The democratic enthusiasm was short-lived and the last decades of our public life were marked by civic apathy.

The scenarios of weak political participation by "traditional means" – which are associated with distrust – and the new perspectives opened by new forms of participation and the access to information and communication technologies show a need to reflect on new perspectives to stimulate the political participation, to reanimate the democracy, and to strengthen the level of trust in democracy and its institutions.

In this context, which role could a reform of the political system (especially the always

⁶ INE, *Estatísticas no feminino. Ser mulher em Portugal: 2001-2011*, Lisboa, 2012, available at < URL: https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_destaques&DESTAQUESdest_boui=135739962&DESTAQUESmodo=2&xlang=pt > [10.12.2016].

⁷ INE, 25 de abril : 40 anos de estatísticas, 2014, available at URL https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_publicacoes&PUBLICACOESpub_boui=216384128&PUBLICACOESmodo=2cit., p. 110 ff.

postponed reform of the voting system) and the political parties⁸ (for example, by mechanisms like open internal elections⁹) play. Especially if we take in account, that the latter were always more concerned in their survival and the preservation of their interests than in creating mechanisms that would bring voters and their representatives closer together.

Unlike in other countries affected by rigorous budgetary policies, the stability of the party system in Portugal prevails and resists all transformations, without the appearance of new political parties present in parliament during the last years (with exception of a Green Party, PAN, in 2015, with an elected representative in the Lisbon area).

There were new independent citizen movements like pensioner's associations; movements defending workers in precarious employment or other kinds of associations. However, they are not – nor do they pretend to be – alternatives to political parties, but see themselves as representatives of certain interest groups without any further going political ambitions.

What concerns the organisation of, for example, volunteer programmes by civil society and its participation in this programs, a study undertaken by the *Centro de Estudos Sociais da Universidade de Coimbra*, edited and published by the foundation Eugenio de Almeida in 2013 – based on data provided by European research institutions as Eurobarometer, European Values Survey, European Social Survey as well as on data published by academic institutions and the European Voluntary Service – shows that, in Portugal, the levels of participation in volunteer activities are low, while the organizations with the highest numbers of participation are organizations in the field of religion, culture, leisure or sporting. Activities in political parties or labour unions are much lower – although the levels of participation in this kind of organization registered in Portugal corresponds to the levels in the other countries of the European Union¹⁰.

⁸ See, among others, PAULO RANGEL and his general observations on this problem, “Que os partidos se abram ao mundo: voto preferencial já”, in *Publico*, 14.01.2014.

⁹ Mecanisms like open elections within parties (PS, 2014) or open lists for candidates running for Parliament (Partido Livre, 2015) will become widespread? See, among others, the general observations on the mechanism of primary elections by ANA RITA FERREIRA, “Vantagens e problemas das eleições primárias no PS”, in *Publico*, 02.10.2014

¹⁰ See *Voluntariado em Portugal – Contextos, Atores e Práticas*, 2013, Fundação Eugénio de Almeida, available online at < URL:

http://fundacaoeugeniodealmeida.pt/rtvoluntariado/ficheiros/ESTUDO_VOLUNTARIADO.pdf > [10.12.2016]. The data presented in this study, which is based on a very extensive number of sources, does not correspond to the analysis and the data presented by Tiago Fernandes in a study published by the foundation Francisco Manuel dos Santos, which presents a very more optimistic view towards voluntary work by comparing, for example, the reality in Portugal and Spain. See *A Sociedade Civil*, 2014 (p. 77 and 78).

If, in the light of this data, it is impossible to deny the existence of a great distance between politics and citizens, the gap is even greater in relation to the decisions made by the European politics.

What concerns Portugal, the data provided by Eurobarometer regarding the trust of the people in political institutions (in relation to 2014) show that, in the European Union, the trust of the Portuguese people in the most representative political institutions (European Union, Parliament and Government) is clearly below the average level of the European Union. If we crosscheck the data with the most recent data of the European Social Survey (2012), we can identify a high level of mistrust in institutions¹¹. The discrepancies are tremendous, with national data being almost half in relation to the European figures regarding the trust in politicians and political parties.

This could be seen as the downside of the growing empowerment of the Portuguese citizens in the way that increasing demands by an "empowered" community of citizens on political actors contrast with the weak capacity of national governments to answer these expectations related to the provision of public goods, especially those improving the quality of life. This causes a gap between expectations and answers that can cause social tensions, especially during economic crisis¹². The analyses made by ÁLVARO VASCONCELOS and RENATO JANINE RIBEIRO during the Conferences point in this direction.

As ÁLVARO VASCONCELOS noted on 28th of September 2015, *empowered citizens are more demanding and governments have less capacity to correspond to this demands of its civil society which will lead to lower expectations of society towards its political actors*. During the conference on 30th of November 2015, RENATO JANINE RIBEIRO expressed himself in the same way, stating that the lack of results lead to a loss of motivation to participate in politics: *democratic action must provide results to society to maintain public trust in democracy and in politics*.

As a general conclusion, it might be suggested that the empowerment of individuals is more tenuous in Portugal than abroad. This main global trend is under way, mas is threatened by the economic slowdown. The uncertainty related to the European Union and our role in the regional context reinforces the concerns on the future of citizens' political participation.

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¹¹ Source: < URL:
<http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/yearFrom/1973/yearTo/2014/surveyKy/2039> [28.11.2015].

¹² EUISS, *Citizens...*, cit., p. 13-14.