



These two slogans encapsulate a net of questions that surfaced in many ways at the conference: was the consolidation of democracy after the transition of 1989/90 sufficiently anchored in the population? And so does democracy have sufficient local support in order for the principle of representation to be effective, the principle we understand as a hallmark of representative democracy? And if this is not the case, then what can we do—or what is already being done by the many local activists that came together for the conference?

“WE WERE EXPECTING THAT DEMOCRACY WOULD BE DONE TO US, NOT BY US.”
CONFERENCE PARTICIPANT FROM RUSSIA


The question of the anchoring of democracy was addressed in many different ways: “We missed out on discussing what democracy meant,” a participant from the Czech Republic commented.

And a participant from Russia underlined how this disconnect between top and bottom, between the people making political decisions and the citizens living with these decisions, is replayed at the level of NGOs: “What happened in the 90s in Russia: a moment of a European foundation that invested in democracy: it was a provider–consumer approach. Probably most of us can explain to foreign European donors that our work is important, but I am not sure if we can explain to everyone in a local village that our work is important. We need to build understanding among our own citizens: this allowed the state to destroy civil society so easily because we didn’t have the support of the people we were supporting. We were providing services for a European foundation rather than building civil society and building a foundation for our work.”

One example for how people empower themselves to successfully fight the lack of representation of their issues was the Women’s Strike Movement in Poland, a grassroots movement

that has so far successfully fought back against the government’s attempt to ban abortions. The Women’s Strike Movement understands itself as a “small town movement”, with leaders that aim to support others to do what they find necessary. This was an answer to the question of how to link the political processes at the grassroots and local level to the level of institutionalized decision-making.

The question of how to organize movements was mirrored by the question of language: what language can civil society actors use, what discourses can movements appeal to, when it comes to mobilization, politicization and self-empowerment? Here, there was an emphasis on concrete language: “Our (Czech Republic) strategy for raising awareness for local issues is to find a common language. Use specific examples to illustrate large issues: for instance, there is less water, there is a drought. We should try to connect different actors from different sectors and backgrounds, so that different people get to talk to each other. We need to combine different strategies because they are all important: direct actions, lobbying, campaigns. A broad range of activities.” But there was also the awareness that language depends on context and that in some contexts an appeal to wider discourses is helpful. A participant from Russia stated: “reacting to communities’ demands and showing how those can be solved domestically: many times activists stand up for local problems without understanding that they are



connected to more general issues; they do not have this human rights view, for example: they don't understand that the fish is rotten from its head; we have to unite more general ideas and have to show that their problems are part of our problems; we have to react to newly arisen problems with our answers, not the government's answers." The Women's Strike Movement provided yet another angle, on a language that highlights the validity of the experiences of women rather than outsourcing expertise to others: "Our movement does not use the human rights argument; we are a small town movement. We use everyday language. 'My old man hit me so hard, I thought he was going to kill me' and not 'I am a domestic violence survivor.'"

Strategies and approaches to activism for democratic change differed from one country to another and from one context to another. Yet there is a common analysis that since the transitions, democratization has been very problematic. Especially in Russia and Poland, activists have fought back against repression and a conservative backlash. But it also became obvious that these challenges were themselves rooted in the development of civil society and the social movements since 1989.