



SUMMARY REPORT

09/12/2024

THE WORLD FORUM FOR DEMOCRACY IS SUPPORTED BY THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND THE TRIENNIAL CONTRACT FOR STRASBOURG EUROPEAN CAPITAL 2024-2026

This report is a summary of the discussions prepared by the Secretariat based on inputs from the Forum Rapporteurs

The 12th Edition of the World Forum for Democracy “Democracy and Diversity - Can we transcend the divides?”

The strength of democracy lies in its ability to embrace and balance differences to serve society as a whole. Diversity is a source of resilience, adaptability and creativity. But it can also be exploited for political gain by polarising opinion and deepening divides. Socio-economic, gender, ethnic, generational and other inequalities fuel divisive rhetoric and trigger electoral choices which make democracies increasingly fragile. The 12th edition of the World Forum for Democracy took place in a year when one half of the world’s population was called to the polls, while large body of research confirmed that many democracies were becoming increasingly polarised.

The environment in which our democratic institutions operate has changed dramatically during the previous few decades. The seismic shift in the information space of democracy towards social media, with all of its vulnerabilities to algorithmic manipulation and information disorder, coincided with several other negative developments. The elections transformed into an amplifier of our perceived differences and divides, while often being the very opener of rifts which are difficult to heal in the governing process. As such, they often feed the mistrust in democratic institutions. The emergence of information bubbles took place in an age marked by the progressive withdrawal of citizens from democratic processes, and the shrinking of civic space.

The main thematic axes of the 2024 edition of the World Forum for Democracy titled “Democracy and Diversity - Can we transcend the divides?” focused on the abovementioned challenges and possible solutions. As indicated in the [Concept Note](#) of the event, the themes were:

- Elections and value divides,
- Unravelling the web of disinformation, and
- Citizen engagement for democratic renewal.

These themes served as the key anchoring points of the Forum’s discussions and main avenues along which the Forum’s participants exchanged views, thus defining the structure of this short report.

Judging by the number of speakers and sessions, the 12th edition of the Forum was one of the largest held so far. The key issues were addressed in 4 thematic plenary sessions (6 and 8 November), 10 labs (showcasing 36 innovative initiatives) and 14 Forum Talks (7 November). The Democracy Innovation Award was awarded, for the very first time, to an initiative coming from South America. The winner of the Award was Brazilian initiative: "Mine, yours, our vote" by “Aurora Institute for Human Rights”. This edition of the Forum also had two satellite events – in Peru, at the Scientific University of the South, and in Poland, at the University of Siedlce. Students from the University of Applied Sciences in Kehl, University of Münster (Germany) and universities of Strasbourg and Syracuse (Strasbourg) actively participated in the events.

More than 1300 participants took part in the Forum’s discussions, among them 169 speakers in different sessions (86 men and 83 women from 61 countries), 71 youth delegates (33 men and 38 women from 52 countries) and many national and local elected officials, representatives of international institutions, journalists, activists, academics, students, etc.

I. Elections and value divides

Elections are pivotal in democratic life, yet they have become flashpoints where deep-seated value divides are exacerbated. The Forum speakers discussed the potential of inclusive electoral practices and new ideas to overcome binary thinking and foster unity within diverse societies. As discussions on the elections unfolded, the need to tackle polarisation and populism became more prominent.

Identification with ideology and party affiliation remains crucial to citizens' voting decisions, as speakers of the "Time for Facts" session pointed out. Paradoxically, many citizens doubt whether a single party can represent their viewpoints and are sceptical about politicians' interest in their views. Value divides and attitudes to change translate easily into political issues. Many citizens think that the demographics of politicians need to change in terms of representation, competence and integrity.

Social media are often used for spreading false information about candidates, content that incites violence or undermines trust in the fairness of the elections' outcome. New sets of standards need to be added to the existing ones and implemented, social media and transparency of political campaigns, which would strengthen trust in the electoral process.

The declining quality of political debate, which often enhances chances of authoritarian populists, was addressed by a number of speakers. By fostering the culture of respectful dialogue, differences of opinion are less likely to result in a deeply polarised society. There is a need to regulate the use of digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI)-generated content in election campaigns, while continuing to explore the potential of such tools to manage electoral processes. Given how recent these developments are, several high-ranking speakers at the Forum advocated for the creation of a new, comprehensive model of civic and media education, as an impactful way for increasing democracies' resilience.

The issue of democratic security needs to be reconsidered, especially in the light of the emerging geopolitical competition between democracies and the increasingly intertwined networks of autocratic regimes. Democracies need to co-operate in protecting one another from foreign attempts to undermine the quality of their democratic institutions and processes.

II. Unravelling the web of disinformation

Disinformation, particularly online, is a powerful tool to manipulate public opinion, sow discord and undermine trust in democratic institutions. Disagreement helps democracies solve problems only if the parties involved share the same basic knowledge and understanding of reality, as one of the speakers pointed out. Many panellists emphasised that various actors, including authoritarian regimes, actively spread narratives that undermine the consensus over the shared ideas and facts. By proactively addressing the overarching narratives, and especially by efficiently spreading human-rights and fact-based narratives, democracies can respond more efficiently to disinformation. This approach can be of critical importance, especially in the era of rapidly developing generative AI.

Democratic governments need to adopt new forms of communication with their citizens – more engaging, timely and accessible – thus assuring that citizens receive trustworthy information.

Understanding the business model of digital platforms that rewards engagement and incentivises polarising content is another important issue. Social media companies can also benefit from meeting the demands of powerful regimes, which gives them wide access to global markets but also makes them vulnerable to accepting state control over the information ecosystem. This can lead to both

restrictions of speech and censorship, as well as leniency in countering disinformation narratives. Democratic governments should step up their efforts to ensure that technology giants comply with democratic standards.

III. Citizen engagement for democratic renewal:

Democracy has been on the decline for two decades, based on the data presented during the “Time for Facts” session of the Forum. The trend towards autocracy is more pronounced in countries with large populations. Currently 71% of the world’s population live in autocracies (up from 48% in 2013).

One of the main drivers of autocratisation is authoritarian populism, which can be understood as a political strategy that pins “the people” against “the elite”. As a rule, populist parties are both anti-establishment and anti-liberal. Democratic resilience demands more opportunities for meaningful citizen participation, while avoiding that the genuine, grassroots movements are captured by authoritarian populist forces.

The global survey data is showing widespread dissatisfaction with governments, which are perceived as unresponsive and disconnected from citizens’ needs. Younger generations feel increasingly excluded from decision-making processes. In many parts of the world, women, minorities, and LGBTI communities face systemic obstacles to participation and to the protection of their rights. Apathy and depoliticisation of the population constitute another looming threat, as the path to authoritarianism is often paved by citizens’ disengagement from politics.

There are grounds for optimism: processes can be initiated to rekindle democratic renewal in many societies. Investments in civil society, independent media outlets and academia can yield results. These democratic institutions can substantially increase a society’s resilience and help it recover from illiberal shocks, by leveraging international people-to-people links and the sharing of knowledge. Participatory democracy processes are seen as vital tools for restoring trust in democratic institutions and policies. They are most effective if understood as a part of a larger ecosystem of diverse forms of democratic participation and they are embedded in the democratic system, rather than being ad-hoc initiatives. Many speakers underscored the importance of developing high-quality leadership skills and having competent leaders at the helm of the most important institutions and organisations.

The way towards a robust democratic revival will demand rethinking democracy at the systemic level. Whereas we do not lack democratic innovations and innovators, the pathways towards a systemic adoption of the new ideas and the dissemination of best practices need to be improved.

IV. Agenda for the future

For democracies in general:

- **Strengthen electoral integrity** by introducing and enforcing human rights-compliant standards of transparency, accountability and oversight in campaign financing and political advertising.
- **Introduce or further develop regulatory frameworks** and penalties for political actors spreading deliberate falsehoods within the scope of their electoral campaign activities.
- Work towards multilateral solutions for developing regulatory tools targeting **disinformation**. These solutions should be developed in dialogue with all relevant stakeholders, including tech companies.
- **Policies countering disinformation should include the following:**
 - response at the level of narratives and devising strategies for pre-bunking, instead of relying mostly on a reactive approach;
 - funding initiatives promoting independent journalism to counter mis- and disinformation;
 - ensuring trustworthiness of information provided by the government sources.
- **Use multi-stakeholder approaches** for co-ordinated efforts between tech companies, governments, civil society, media outlets and academia. Strike an appropriate balance between regulation and protection of human rights, especially freedom of expression and the right to access information.
- **Invest in media and information literacy** in order to help citizens gain resilience to disinformation campaigns. Develop common standards and systematically share best practices.
- Enhance the digital security of **vital digital infrastructure**.
- **Empower marginalised communities**, by ensuring their adequate representation in governance structures.
- **Address historical grievances** and support reconciliation in post-conflict societies, also by employing multilateral mechanisms.
- **Enhance possibilities for citizen participation** within a broad ecosystem of representative and participatory mechanisms. Reconstruct current models of democracy, also by institutionalising participatory democracy, to facilitate citizens' engagement, especially among the youth. Strengthen democratic processes by the appropriate use of new technologies.
- Put additional emphasis on **youth policy and education**, notably on enhancing leadership skills among the youth; further invest in programmes that encourage young people to engage in local governance.
- Build mechanisms of **good governance** to maintain trust in a democracy and counter disinformation. Such mechanisms should also make citizens comfortable with change at a local level and become receptive to systemic implementation of democratic innovations.
- **Support democratisation globally**, especially in the Global South.

For Council of Europe member states:

- **Implement Council of Europe and other international standards** and uphold **multilateralism**, including introducing new standards where necessary.
- **Accept the new geopolitical reality** – democracies need to collaborate in countering disinformation campaigns and other challenges, since authoritarian countries had already established their networks.

- Introduce robust and comprehensive governance system for **monitoring election campaigns** on all levels.
- Engage in **exchanges of parliamentarians** from different parts of the world, sharing best practices, and experiences.
- Further develop strategies for making the **local level of government more responsive** to citizens.

For civil society:

- **Strengthen media and information literacy programmes** – partner with educational institutions to train citizens in identifying and resisting disinformation.
- Develop **programmes for vulnerable communities** disproportionately affected by disinformation.
- Support grassroots organisations working on **empowerment of women and girls, minorities, LGBTI groups**, especially concerning their visibility in the public sphere.
- Promote **cross-community dialogue**: facilitate discussions between polarised groups to restore mutual understanding and trust.
- Strengthen the **dialogue between generations**.
- Continue advocating for **inclusive policies**.

For tech companies:

- **Improve the transparency of algorithms** by disclosing how they prioritise content and implement measures to deprioritise harmful and evidently false information.
- Collaborate with **fact-checking** organisations and develop more effective mechanisms for recognition and flagging of problematic content; develop more effective mechanisms for users to flag and report potentially harmful content.
- Develop tools supporting **election integrity** – create features which label political ads, verify candidates' accounts and provide transparency in add targeting.
- Implement AI tools that detect and prevent dissemination of **deepfake content**.
- Promote **ethical AI** by establishing internal guidelines for developing AI tools that do not perpetuate biases or harm marginalised groups. Establish effective mechanisms for the elimination of fake profiles and content inciting violence.