World Forum for Democracy

World Forum for Democracy 2025

Concept note

Democracy at risk: how can we revive it?

According to global survey data citizens are increasingly dissatisfied with democracy for reasons which include, *inter alia*, the growing economic inequality, the seismic shifts in technology, and the feeling that citizens' voices are ignored. The lack of trust in democratic institutions and processes undermines democratic legitimacy, stability and resilience to external and internal threats. When citizens are no longer invested in democracy, they may gradually withdraw from voting and other forms of participation in civic life, leaving the fundamental freedoms that underpin democratic institutions increasingly vulnerable. This vulnerability creates an environment in which populists and autocrats have greater latitude to weaken institutional checks and balances, undermine constitutional protections, and restrict freedoms such as freedom of expression and association. These actions further weaken the democratic culture necessary for safeguarding public authorities' accountability and pluralism, entrenching autocrats' hold on power.

Journalism, arts, and culture are essential elements of democratic resilience, serving as vital channels for pluralism, inclusiveness, and public engagement. Quality journalism and creative pursuits contribute to a deeper understanding of societal realities, help shape values and perspectives relevant to political choices, and enable informed public participation. However, these actors are often among the first targets of authoritarian regimes which further undermines the pluralistic and informed public debate and democratic opposition.

In addition, advanced digital technologies such as AI can enable autocrats to use sophisticated forms of (electoral and other) manipulation, disinformation campaigns, and the amplification of divisive and polarising content. Large technology companies and social media platforms have significant power to determine what users access on these platforms; they can limit exposure to diverse viewpoints and create a narrow version of reality for their users, driven by their owners' corporate interests or external pressures such as the demands of autocratic regimes. Moreover, the business models of large social media and other platforms reward engagement above all else and incentivise the spread of polarising content. These issues underline the need for platforms to be better aligned with democratic values also because these same platforms, if effectively governed, have immense potential to process information efficiently, support complex participatory processes, amplify reliable information, and help build more cohesive and resilient societies.

Young people are the most active users of digital platforms but also are, in many societies, a demographically declining group which raises many questions about ways in which their participation in, and influence in democratic institutions and processes, can be reinforced, and how their engagement can help safeguard democratic freedoms.

Some of the following goals derive from these challenges:

- identifying **social, economic, cultural and other reasons** driving people away from democracy and exploring ways to address them;
- discussing approaches to building a solid **democratic culture** which enables citizens to detect disinformation and resist populist “solutions” and autocratic shifts, to mobilise when their democratic rights and freedoms are under threat, and be willing to actively and competently engage in both representative and participatory democracy processes;
- exploring methods of **reinforcing the will and capacity of public authorities** to protect the integrity of public debate and democratic principles in the context of online platforms;
- **finding ways to protect media freedom**, independence and pluralism, and increase the capacity and **freedom of artists** to contribute meaningfully to public debate.

Key questions:

- What are the social and economic reasons causing indifference and mistrust in democracy and how to respond to them?
- What is the role of actors such as political parties, civil society organisations and movements, formal and non-formal education, media and internet service providers and public institutions at all levels in re-building democratic culture and restoring trust in democracy?
- How can public policies and the contribution of non-state actors help reinforce access to and participation in culture and the freedom and diversity of cultural life?
- What tools can we mobilise to ensure that democratic public authorities are able to protect the integrity and pluralism of the public information space?
- How can we effectively foster an informed and pluralistic public debate, support artistic freedom, promote diversity and enable more equitable and meaningful public participation?
- Can democracy innovations such as deliberative and participatory mechanisms, citizens chambers, sortition etc. help renew democracy, rebuild trust and bring citizens on board?

This event is a contribution towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe, which is a strategic and political consultation process launched by the Council of Europe to reinforce the foundations of democracy, amplify its benefits, restore trust and innovate its form. The results of this process will shape the future work of the Council of Europe to make democracy tangible and meaningful for all.