For a Just Democracy!

BKHS
MAGAZINE

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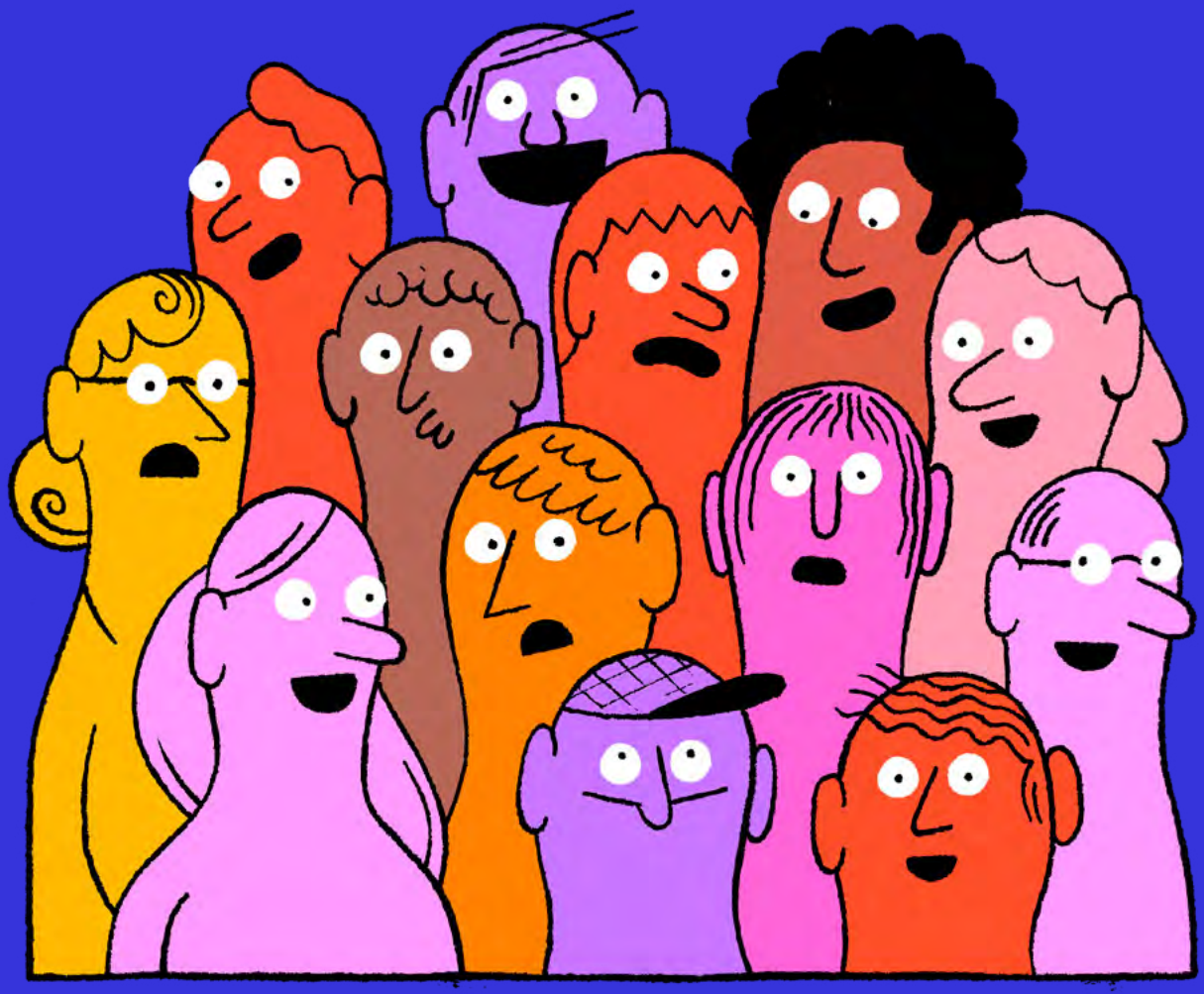

DEAR READERS,

TEXT: ELISABETH WINTER

Democracy is not a given. Today, it is straining under the weight of a number of major challenges: a growing number of wars, intensifying global geopolitical rivalry, the ever more acute climate crisis, staggering social and economic inequalities and rapid technological developments. Instead of seeking inclusive answers to this polycrisis, the political landscape is dominated by nationalism and populism, both of which are fuelling distrust in democratic institutions and driving polarisation. The super election year of 2024 has impressively demonstrated the uncertain future of democracy. Even if anti-democratic parties haven't been successful across the board, a shift in power in favour of authoritarian forces is a sad reality in many places.

Democracy, at least in the West, appears to be on the retreat. Fortunately, democrats in many places are opposing this development, whether through vigorous political debate, demonstrations on the street or a wide variety of civil society initiatives. It is discouraging, however, that they only talk about democracy in the context of stopping right-wing movements. Pro-democratic forces seem to have lost the ability to offer a positive, inclusive and hopeful vision for democracy. The most striking example of the debate being dominated by right-wing issues in many established democracies are the increasing calls from across the political spectrum to drastically curb immigration. Instead of resolutely opposing the scapegoating of immigrants and proposing inclusive alternatives, centrist and even progressive political parties are picking up the claims of the right-wing and engaging in anti-immigrant rhetoric themselves, even if in weakened form.

This makes it all the more important to bring back into the debate core progressive values such as justice, equality and inclusion. Building on these fundamentals, the current atmosphere of fear and distrust can be replaced by a positive vision for democracy. We at the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung encourage this process by calling for a just democracy – one that is based on open, constructive and respectful debate and that promotes social cohesion amongst all members of its political community. Under this motto – "For a Just Democracy!" – we are seeking to identify critical success factors for maintaining, strengthening or, in some cases, reinstating a just democracy that is resilient against the numerous threats putting democracies under strain.

The fourth edition of the BKHS Magazine elaborates on a variety of success factors for just democracies by assembling a diverse group of authors. Drawing on their different skillsets, the contributions by academics, think tankers, politicians, activists and artists present us with a mixed set of recommendations, whether it be recommitting ourselves to open and inclusive dialogue, reinvesting in local politics and communities, redefining the role of government in the economy or reacting to the warning signs of creeping authoritarianism. Using different formats such as essays, poems, images and many others, the authors offer us food for thought and calls to action.

The 2024 Helmut Schmidt Lecture follows this call for democracy in action by featuring a committed advocate for a just democracy, Mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu. Since taking office in 2019, he has succeeded in offering a new political vision that has spread far beyond the Turkish capital. Dedicated to democracy, transparency and inclusivity, Mayor İmamoğlu has enacted a raft of progressive policies and attracted a broad base of support across ideological divides. After a resounding re-election victory in spring 2024, he has become the new bearer of hope for the opposition that aims to restore a just democracy in Turkey.

→ Elisabeth Winter is Programme Director "Global Markets and Social Justice" at BKHS.

Content

III — FUTURES

What does "just democracy" mean to you?

For me, a just democracy is not merely a system of governance – it is a commitment. It guarantees that every individual, regardless of their background, has the right to participate and the opportunity to thrive. It is a system where the majority holds no unchecked power, and the minority is protected from oppression.

In a just democracy, every voice is heard and every perspective is welcomed. It fosters a vibrant tapestry of diversity, ensuring justice is the foundation for equal opportunities for all.

In Istanbul, we work every day to bring this ideal to life. Our city, rich in history and culture, demonstrates the transformative potential of a just democracy. We are dedicated to making every community – long-established or newly arrived – feel integral to our shared progress. Quality education, healthcare and basic rights should neither be aspirations nor privileges but a tangible reality for all.

For me, leading Istanbul means embracing sustainable, inclusive growth that honours our natural and cultural heritage, ensuring nobody is left behind.

By implementing inclusive policies that directly tackle discontent, exclusion and marginalisation, we can weaken some of the most effective tactics authoritarian populists use to erode the foundations of democracy.

Our response must be to build systems that uphold justice. We must create sustainable institutions that respect and recognise vulnerable groups and redistribute resources and opportunities equitably.

I call this approach "democratic people-ism"–a redefinition of populism that emphasises unity, fairness and respect. It is time that we turn the bad reputation of populism around and restore its real meaning.

By focusing on the "three Rs", that is respect, recognise, and redistribute, we have the chance to create cities – and ultimately societies – where democracy not only survives but thrives.

This commitment to democracy, justice and welfare drives me forward every day as Mayor. It is my belief that by embodying these values, we will not only uplift Istanbul but set a global standard for what a just democracy can truly accomplish.

Ekrem İmamoğlu: Mayor of Istanbul and Speaker of the Helmut Schmidt Lecture 2024

A modern industrial policy can promote a just democracy. Under the mantle of "Bidenomics", the US administration has launched a new industrial policy aimed not only at boosting economic growth and competing with China, but also at strengthening American democracy.

INDUSTRIAL POLICY

FOR A JUST DEMOCRACY

TEXT: MATTHEW DELMASTRO AND ELISABETH WINTER

Industrial policy is the new buzzword animating economic thinking in the US, but also increasingly in Europe and other parts of the world. It makes up a core part of what has become known as "Bidenomics", or the Biden administration's new economic philosophy that self-consciously breaks with market fundamentalism in favour of greater state involvement in and steering of the economy. A larger role for the state in economic affairs will almost certainly continue regardless of who succeeds Joe Biden in the White, as made clear by both Kamala Harris's and Donald's Trump's economic policy agendas (Tankersley 2024).

For a country that for decades has been the epicentre and enforcer of the main tenets of what some call "neoliberalism" or the "Washington Consensus" – e.g. free trade, privatisation, deregulation and state budget cuts – this is indeed a startling reversal, but one which is welcome amidst the multiple and overlapping crises of our time. From a European perspective, much of the debate around US industrial policy has centred on the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and how its clean energy and subsidies for electric vehicles (EV) may threaten European firms' competitiveness and lure them to invest in the US rather than in Europe. But these debates can come across as short-sighted, as they ignore the broader, more positive fact of the US being "back at the table" in the fight against climate change. It also betrays a lack of understanding of the broader project and goals of Bidenomics. One particularly overlooked aspect is its explicit focus on improving the socioeconomic conditions conducive to the stability of democracy. We illustrate how Bidenomics seeks to strengthen American democracy, showcasing that a modern industrial policy can promote democracy by reducing inequalities, delivering good jobs and higher wages and, ultimately, increasing trust in government.

Understanding industrial policy

Despite there being no consensus on the definition of industrial policy, we follow Dani Rodrik and his colleagues in defining it generally as "those government policies that explicitly target the transformation of the structure of economic activity in pursuit of some public goal" (Juhász et al. 2023). In other words, industrial policy entails government favouring certain industries and sectors over others to achieve some larger objective, whether it be economic growth, competitiveness, reducing inequalities or bolstering national security. Historically, industrial policy mainly targeted economic and productivity growth in the manufacturing sector, but new approaches have widened both the range of objectives as well as the sectors to which it is applied. States are now using industrial policy to promote decarbonisation, digitalisation, the development of lagging regions and the creation of new, well-paid forms of employment. In developed countries in particular, new industrial policy calls for extending interventions into the vast services sectors, as in countries like the US, only around 10 per cent of the workforce is still employed in manufacturing (Rodrik 2022).

The primary mechanism of industrial policy consists in offering incentives to the private sector to produce particular goods or offer particular services. Usually, these incentives come in the form of subsidies; however, many other tools are possible. New industrial policy explicitly calls for novel forms of support, such as the provision of customised business services, job training, improved infrastructure and various forms of private-public collaboration. Common to all these forms of intervention is that they, one, seek to remove the production constraints facing certain sectors and firms and, two, involve some form of conditionality to qualify for government support. Industrial policy sometimes gets a bad rap for its connotations of inward-looking protectionism, but this need not be the case. In fact, it is often used to help make firms more competitive internationally and to facilitate exports.

But for all the recent excitement around industrial policy, it is far from a new phenomenon. On a very basic level, states are always engaged in industrial policy to the extent that they incentivise certain sectors of the economy over others. In the US, for example, this is blatantly obvious when looking at the defence sector and the wider

"A modern industrial policy can promote democracy by reducing inequalities, delivering good jobs and higher wages and, ultimately, increasing trust in government."

US military-industrial complex. In addition, a brief glance at history offers manifold examples of ambitious industrial policy. As economist Brad Delong points out, the US has run various successful industrial policy experiments throughout its history which have all served to fundamentally redesign the structure of the economy (Delong 2022). From Alexander Hamilton's tariffs designed to finance subsidies and protect American industry to Dwight Eisenhower's preservation of the New Deal architecture and further investments in social security, the US has a long and storied history of robust government intervention in pursuit of pragmatic policy goals. In a sense, then, the recent free market era concerned above all with keeping the state out of the economy can just as well be viewed as an historical exception rather than the rule.

Bidenomics and the new US industrial policy

To best get a sense of what Bidenomics and the new US industrial policy is all about, it is easiest to list the challenges to which they are meant to respond. In April 2023, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan gave what is perhaps the clearest explanation of the Biden administration's new international economic policy in a speech at the Brookings Institution (Sullivan 2023). In it, he implies that the administration is proposing a "new Washington Consensus" to leave behind the era of "trickle-down economic policies". This rethink, he explains, was prompted by four fundamental challenges facing the US.

The first challenge Sullivan named has been the hollowing out of American industry as a result of the old market-liberal paradigm of trade liberalisation and privatisation. Certain sectors like the financial industry won out while manufacturing experienced massive, geographically-concentrated job losses embodied in the "China Shock" of the 1990s and 2000s (Autor et al. 2016). The second challenge consists in the failure of what is known in Germany as Wandel durch Handel: the idea of a more economically interconnected world leading to more peaceful and collaborative relations between states and the gradual transformation of autocracies into democracies. The third challenge, according to Sullivan, is the accelerating climate crisis and the accompanying need for rapid and massive action to ensure a "just and efficient energy transition" that rejects the false choice between economic growth and climate action. The fourth and final challenge laid out by Sullivan is the state of inequality in America and how it has undermined social cohesion and the socioeconomic conditions necessary for a stable democracy. Sullivan lays the blame for rising inequality at the foot of trickle-down economics and a free trade paradigm that promised broadly distributed gains, but which, in reality, massively benefitted the wealthy while squeezing the middle class.

The speech is striking for its explicit condemnation of the previous market-liberal paradigm, one that had gone unquestioned for decades amongst both Republicans and

"Industrial policy is implemented in the realm of the economy, but its motivations and effects are also to be found in the realm of politics."

Democrats, but also for its recognition that inequality has had a corrosive and destabilising effect on American democracy. As is made clear, the Biden team has fully bought into the new thinking about industrial policy by seeking to meet a handful of diverse objectives with its economic policies. Under the mantle of Bidenomics, it is seeking to, among other things: revive the American manufacturing sector, accelerate the energy transition, drive innovation, reduce inequalities, increase the power of labour over capital, reduce strategic dependencies and outcompete China.

In concrete terms, the administration is pursuing these goals via four pieces of legislation passed in 2021 and 2022: the American Rescue Plan (ARP), the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). Even excluding the ARP stimulus bill passed in the wake of the pandemic, the remaining three laws contain over $1.5 trillion in new spending and investment. A useful metaphor for this set of laws describes the CHIPS act as the "brains", the IIJA as the "backbone" and the IRA as the "engine" (Carey & Shepard 2022). The CHIPS Act is the brains because it concentrates its roughly $280 billion of spending on semiconductor R&D and manufacturing ($53 billion) as well as on America's overall research and science ecosystem. The IIJA makes up the backbone for its massive investments to rebuild America's roads and bridges, to modernise the grid for the renewable energy build-out and to finish expanding broadband infrastructure. The IRA represents the engine for its powerful package of loans, grants and tax credits ($370 billion) to incentivise the green energy transition and to boost domestic manufacturing.

Industrial policy and democracy

Industrial policy is implemented in the realm of the economy, but its motivations and effects are also to be found in the realm of politics. We would therefore like to shift the attention to those aspects of the laws that are connected to questions of democracy and justice in order to illustrate how industrial policy can strengthen democracy. Three aspects are worth highlighting in particular.

First, industrial policy can reduce geographical and socioeconomic inequalities in the form of place-based policy, or "government efforts to enhance the economic performance of an area within its jurisdiction" (Neumark & Simpson 2014). It typically targets lagging regions with the goal of creating more job opportunities and higher wages. The Biden administration has been implementing place-based policy through its Justice40 Initiative, which pledges that 40 per cent of the overall benefits of federal investments in climate, clean energy and sustainable housing go to disadvantaged communities plagued by underinvestment and pollution (Daly & Gunn-Wright 2022, The White House 2024). And the data shows that this effort has already been paying off: the massive increase in construction spending occurring across the US has been concentrated in the struggling Rust Belt (as well

as the rising Sun Belt) and, at a local level, in rural and often more conservative regions of the country (Politano 2024). In its recent IRA report, the Biden administration boasted that "99 per cent of high-poverty counties have received funding from the infrastructure law, CHIPS Act, or Inflation Reduction Act, and non-metro communities have received nearly double the per capita funding of their urban counterparts" (The White House 2024). Place-based industrial policy can thus play an essential role in rectifying geographic inequalities that undermine social solidarity and sow resentments among people living in "left-behind regions".

Second, industrial policy can help to rebalance the power between labour and capital by promoting new job growth, higher wages and union density. This is especially important in places, such as the US, where the power of labour has been continuously and systematically weakened since the 1980s. Besides generating new job growth through its investment spending, the Biden administration is pursuing these objectives by offering incentives for firms to pay prevailing wages and to use collective bargaining agreements, such as in the IRA's clean energy tax credit (The White House 2024). More far-reaching provisions in support of unions fell victim to the legislative bargaining process, such as the proposal to give extra tax credits for EVs produced in union shops. Such ideas were viciously opposed by foreign automakers and even raised protest from European ambassadors trying to protect their firms operating in non-union states (Gabor et al. 2023). A more general component of the push to support labour is the Biden administration's policy of running the economy hot, or keeping demand high and unemployment low to put upward pressure on wages and give workers more bargaining power. Taken together, these are all pro-worker measures that can help to reduce the staggering levels of economic inequality that sow distrust in institutions and enforce peoples' beliefs that the system is rigged in favour of those at the top.

Third, and more generally, a coherent and successfully implemented industrial policy can demonstrate to citizens that government can actually solve problems and offer real, tangible benefits to their lives. The Biden administration's promise is to raise wages, create good sustainable jobs, ensure a cleaner and healthier environment, rebuild local infrastructure and to protect the country's economic and strategic interests amidst competition with China. Insofar as these investments pan out and people start to feel the positive impact of their government's actions, it can go some way in restoring the dismal levels of trust in government institutions and politicians. Despite the increases in investment and construction spending, as well the growth of new clean energy jobs (Climate Power 2024), the real impacts of the legislation will take years to pan out. The onus is now on the government to move from the allocation of funds to, in collaboration with the private sector, seeing projects through to implementation.

Industrial policy, while not a panacea, offers several tools for strengthening democracy by addressing various forms of inequality and delivering tangible benefits to citizens. It also, after decades of the supremacy of free market thinking, represents a much-needed revitalisation of the idea that the state, acting in the public interest, has an essential role to play in tackling today's biggest challenges and safeguarding democracy.

→ Matthew Delmastro is a research assistant at the BKHS.

→ Elisabeth Winter is Programme Director "Global Markets and Social Justice".

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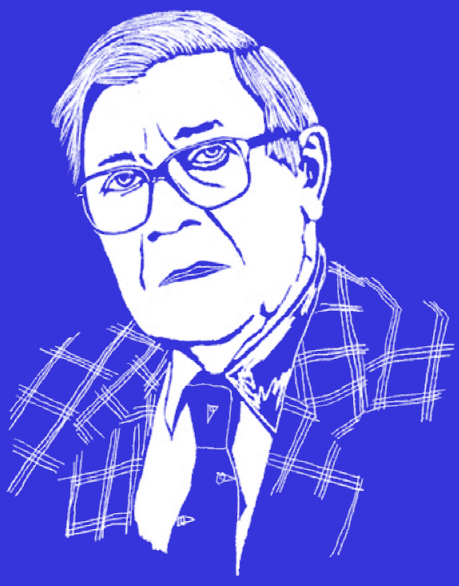


"If you are 18 and want to become a politician, you are suspect to me. You should first learn a profession and pursue this job successfully. After that, you are very welcome to get involved in politics."

Former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt believed that young people should not immediately pursue a career in politics but should focus on other professional options first. However, youth engagement and activism have changed considerably since 2008, when Helmut Schmidt voiced this opinion. This year, Helmut steps aside to make room for the perspectives of young people. We asked them: ***"What does it take to engage successfully in politics?"***

Five Questions

ANSWERED BY KATJA SUDING

Katja Suding is a consultant, speaker, author and coach and was state chairwoman of the FDP Hamburg from 2014 to 2021 and deputy federal chairwoman of her party from 2015 to 2021. She is a Deputy Member of the Board of Trustees of the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung (BKHS).

1. Who are you – and what does a just democracy mean to you?

My name is Katja Suding. I was a member of the German Bundestag until 2021, and before that a member of the Hamburg Parliament. Today I am a freelance consultant, author, speaker and business coach. I owe almost all the development opportunities I have had and continue to have to the democracy in which I live.

2. How do you promote a just democracy in your daily work and as a former politician?

In my public appearances and talks, I repeatedly draw attention to the inestimable value of democracy. Especially in the politically turbulent times in which we find ourselves. I explain where the dangers lie that we need to protect ourselves from and that it is worth actively standing up for our democracy.

3. How can enterprises and entrepreneurs contribute to improving and strengthening democracy?

Entrepreneurs can and should be a good role model for their employees. Not by necessarily promoting their own positions, but by encouraging a respectful and profitable exchange of different positions. Because that is what democracy thrives on.

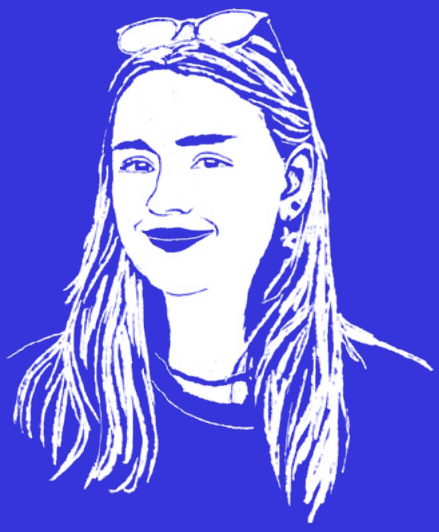
4. Can disagreement strengthen democracies?

No democracy without disagreement! Democracy thrives on the exchange of different positions and perspectives. I am incredibly happy that we are allowed to disagree in Germany and to express this out loud, what a privilege! That's why we a a ~~society~~ must not forget how to argue.

5. What are your three wishes for the future of a just democracy?

Actually, I only have one. My greatest wish is that all people get the chance to live in democratic systems. So they can live self-determined lives and realize their dreams in life.

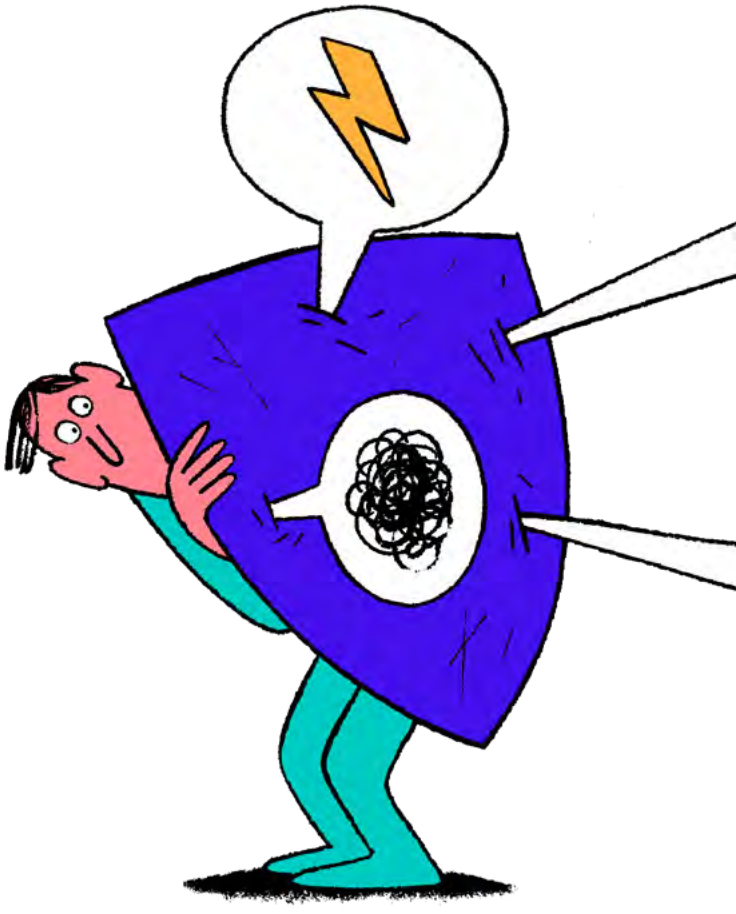
What does it take to engage successfully in politics?



"It is important to me to have all age groups included. There has to be exchange between old and young people's perspectives. Being active politically means shaping the future — and the experiences and interests of young people need to be included more often!"

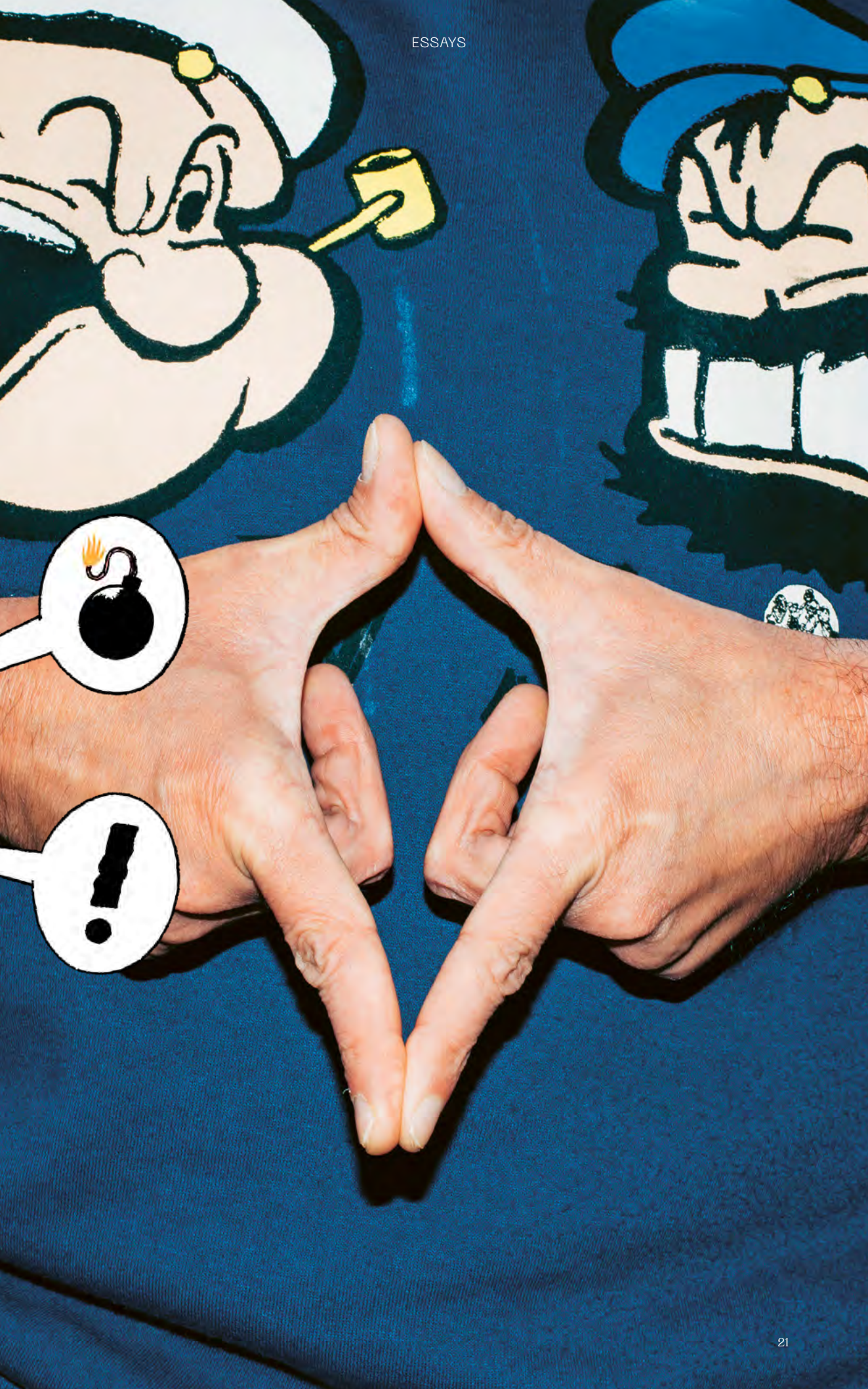
Frieda, 17 years old from Hamburg, took part in the demonstrations to strengthen democracy in the run-up to her first European elections.

A strong democracy needs resilient local politics!



TEXT: MARIA HELMIS-AREND

As far-right ideologies and violence are increasingly shaping the political landscape, local politicians in Germany are faced every day with an exhausting challenge: how can they support their communities and defend local democracy while they themselves are exposed to threats from the right?



Since the brutal attack on Dresden local politician Matthias Ecke in May 2024 at the latest, a feeling that had been gradually spreading among local volunteer politicians* in recent years has become an omnipresent reality: anyone who works for diversity and democracy as a local political officeholder knows that – in addition to vicious verbal attacks in person or online – they are also increasingly exposed to the risk of physical attacks.

The instigators behind this political climate are no longer exclusively found outside our municipal institutions: as representatives of far-right parties, they are often members of district, city and municipal parliaments. There, they present their toxic rhetoric, distort discourse, scandalise and twist facts. They poison democratic discourse with disinformation, hate speech and the constant invocation of doomsday scenarios.

At a time in which the answers to our multiple crises and societal change must inevitably be increasingly complex (even in local politics), the seemingly simple answers from the right can quickly become attractive. On top of this comes the increasingly precarious budget situation of local authorities and institutions. This situation makes it difficult for local politicians to demonstrate rapid and effective responses to local issues. Right-wing forces are jumping into this policy implementation dilemma at the local level with delight. One of the biggest challenges is the narrative these forces are fuelling, stigmatising volunteer politicians as alleged antagonists of the common good and portraying democratic processes as ineffective.

* While many political offices can fill a whole day, not all politicians occupy an office as a full-time job. In many European countries, such as Germany, a council membership at municipality level is performed additionally to another employment. Hence, meetings must be scheduled at work-free times, usually in the evening. These politicians usually receive a financial compensation for their efforts. In some cases, politicians receive a fixed allowance for occupying an office, in other cases, the politicians are awarded a renumeration for each council meeting or community work they attend. In either cases, the awarded sums are not sufficient to replace the income of a normal job. Local politicians therefore willingly trade their free time to participate at democratic decision-making on a local level.

How the right undermines local policy-making

In addition to their anti-democratic and violence-inciting agenda, right-wing forces are becoming increasingly effective at paralysing local politics through the use of parliamentary instruments. For example, right-wing representatives are making inflationary use of specially called current affairs debates (*Aktuelle Stunden* in German), where they are not actually trying to solve a specific problem nor to reach an understanding with other parliamentary groups. Secret roll-call votes are requested for the simplest votes in the city councils, which often drags the meetings on into the late hours of the evening. The administration is flooded with questions about the costs of integration policy and cultural policy oriented toward equality and diversity. Important decisions are artificially delayed by requesting legal reviews.

All of this is constantly accompanied by hostility towards the speakers of the democratic parliamentary groups and a general questioning of pluralistic world views, not only in parliament, but also via the social media channels of these enemies of democracy. Their social media channels in particular receive considerable attention and resonance from the population.

The consequences of these obstruction tactics are devastating: besides consuming an enormous amount of time, it is becoming increasingly difficult for volunteer local politicians from democratic parties to work effectively for the actual interests of the community.

More and more volunteer local politicians are therefore choosing to throw in the towel. They are out of energy; they can no longer explain and justify to themselves sacrificing their free time for something that so obviously takes a toll on their mental strength. At the same time, young people, women and people with migrant backgrounds in particular are increasingly deciding against taking on local political responsibilities due to the brutal political climate and toxic rhetoric. This is leading to a serious problem of representation in local politics, threatening to further alienate the population from local political actors.

Fighting back

This makes it all the more important to strengthen local politicians and politics. First and foremost, municipalities must be given greater financial support. Peoples' daily realities can be effectively improved only if local budgets are sound; they also hold the key to liveable cities and municipalities beyond the mere provision of basic services forming the basis for robust trust in democracy.

However, the physical protection of those involved in local politics must also take centre stage: 60 per cent of local politicians have already been subjected to harassment or other forms of hostility. We therefore need a clear legal framework to report, prosecute and punish online hate speech and hostility, as well as an expansion of counselling services for those affected by right-wing hate speech and intimidation tactics.

Beyond such protection, voluntary work in local politics can also be supported through improved compensation and structures: meeting allowances could be raised, hybrid appointments offered and meeting schedules made more family-friendly.

Furthermore, it is necessary that local politics is continually explained to the populace. This requires the strengthening of political education programmes (instead of cutting political education from our schools' curricula) as well as the preservation of independent municipal reporting structures.

Finally, the resilience of local politics can be strengthened at the level of concrete interactions: right-wing narratives and half-truths must be countered by focussing on the central social issues of the community. Harsh rhetoric be countered and either/or logics dissolved. The democratic discourse of localities must once again pursue the goal of reaching a common understanding about the best way to create a truly liveable community. This also means not shying away from direct personal encounters but rather seeking them, especially now. This is the best way to overcome reservations and fears of contact. If local politics is becoming increasingly polarised and everyone is only catering to their own echo chambers: how can a joint endeavour against the enemies of democracy succeed?

→ Maria Helmis-Arend is deputy leader of the SPD parliamentary group in the city council of Cologne. In 2024, she was awarded the German federal government's Helene Weber Prize for her commitment to local politics.

THE ROLES WE PLAY: RECOGNISING THE CONTRIBUTION OF PEOPLE IN POVERTY

PUBLISHED BY ATD FOURTH WORLD IN 2014,
WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY EVA SAJOVIC

The Roles We Play is a project of ATD Fourth World (2009 to 2019) aiming to allow people with experience of poverty to tell their own stories in the way that they want to tell them. This enables people who have not experienced poverty to better understand that, just like them, people in poverty exercise agency in their everyday lives but do so within much greater constraints. The project seeks to counteract negative media narratives which portray "poor people" as "others", to focus on positive actions by individuals and communities, to stop blaming people for their situation, and to engage them in finding solutions.

ROBERT / HANDYMAN I came to London forty years ago. I used to work in a brewery doing sixteen hour days driving fork lift trucks. Now I do manual work and handyman jobs for others. I like being part of the community by helping people, churches and charities. I don't believe in church but don't mind doing work for them. People always say thank you. They appreciate it but I have a bad back and suffer for it all at night. I'm a kind artist. Why not be kind? People are poor so you help them out. How often do others help out and do something for nothing? It's the way I was brought up; help people out who can't manage and show them some respect.

People on benefits often get a bad rep. The newspapers shouldn't be about people on benefits; it's not real news. That's when the trouble starts. We don't get treated right.

GWEN / POVERTY DEFENDER In my family, I play the role of being a carer for my dad as he's disabled. I also volunteer two times a week with those who suffer with learning disabilities. People know that they can come to me whenever they want because I'm not going to turn them away. Coming from a poverty family, a lot of society thinks that poor people won't get into university. By going to university and proving that I'm better than people think, I'm going to make my family proud. I want to go into nursing, hopefully, to help others again.

The public thinks that people who are on benefits and in poverty just use the system, abuse it and don't deserve to get the help and the money they do. But they do. You can't rely on money or benefits to make you happy; they won't be there when you're angry, upset or lost and confused. You rely on family and friends. That's when the trouble starts. We don't get treated right.

ERIC / FREEDOM FIGHTER I believe in putting others before myself. I like to help other people. I'm quite happy to help but I hate asking for help. I've been involved with the Disability Discrimination Acts, the protection of vulnerable adults, general discussions about how to improve the day-to-day lives of disabled people and ways of making money go further on a limited budget. Now I'm involved in a group bringing together people who live in poverty to talk and discuss ways of helping each other out so we can get them to realise that they're not alone.

Poverty has no voice. The government always promises to help those on low income, on disability, the elderly and kids but those same four groups are the first people they attack the moment they want to save money. We're not scroungers! The majority of us just want to have a chance to live.

GEORGINA / POET I like to write poems because I can express all my thoughts easier than speaking them. When I'm with people I wonder what they see in me. But there's one thing they can't see and that is the loneliness in me. The hardest time is Christmas time. You watch people going in and out of the shops, laughing and saying what they are going to buy for their family and you're just sitting there with no family. It gets very lonely. So what do I do? I can't tell people the way I feel so I walk and walk until I find a tree and get some decorations and put them on it.

I think it doesn't matter if you're in poverty or out of poverty, we all should be treated the same. After all, we're all human beings, aren't we? If everybody helps each other, that's the only way poverty can end; everybody's got to get together and work together.

JOEL / MUSIC MAN I've been on this estate forever. I was one of the kids here and I still play outside. I've lived here all my life so I think I'm a very good person to be working with them at the local after-school club. One of the things I do is to run music workshops. I've done music for a while as my own thing and I really like it. I come here and teach the kids and they really enjoy it. I started bringing my guitar, then I brought hand drums and then we started beat-boxing. It means a lot to me; it's something I really do enjoy.

People in poverty definitely are discriminated against but it's not outright, it's more behind the scenes. When people know you're from a certain area, they instantly look at you differently. It's never necessarily about how you look or what you have, it's just where you're from.

RITA / COMMUNITY ACTIVIST Being an activist means you support each other in any way that you can. It means being a friend. It means doing anything in your power, whatever it takes, for the eradication of poverty.

People have a lot to do for their everyday life, day to day, wondering where the next penny is coming from. You worry about your family but you say, "I've had enough of this. I want to do something about changing the laws and the system." We need to make changes and we need to change. What I see on TV brings a lump to my throat. Being an activist means fighting against this.

CONOR AND TRISH, CONOR I help the children with drawing because it's something I'm good at and something they want to do. So I'm teaching them but, at the same time, I'm learning and they're learning; it's about finding something they can have a passion for.

To me, community means everyone, of different walks of life, coming together. The programme that iiChild is running here should happen in more places. It can build confidence for the kids and, if they don't go out much, could be a way to make new friends.

TRISH I try to be a role model for the younger kids. I try to set rules and discipline and teach the kids about what it means to be respected or to be a respectful person to others. That's really what I do.

TAKE A LOOK AT THE FULL-COLOUR BOOK PUBLISHED BY THE ROLES WE PLAY TO EXPLORE MORE PHOTOGRAPHS AND STORIES OF PEOPLE WITH EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY. ↘

Democratic resilience from the bottom up

TEXT: MARIA SKÓRA

In the last decade, we have observed the rise of illiberal populism. Beyond analysing authoritarian playbooks, it is as important to identify the sources of democratic resilience to mitigate the risks of what some researchers call the third wave of autocratisation.

The illiberal wave

Populists don't always turn into autocrats. However, once they do, it isn't easy to contain them. To consolidate their power, they purposely dismantle democratic foundations. In Europe, the most dramatic consequences of the illiberal-populist backlash materialised in Hungary in 2010, when the Fidesz party won parliamentary elections by a landslide. Since then, Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has developed into a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy (Del Río 2022). And Orbán's copycats — Janez Janša (Slovenian Democratic Party, SDS) in Slovenia and Jarosław Kaczyński (Law and Justice, PiS) in Poland — were similarly successful.

Slovenia experienced a shorter autocratic episode (2020–2022), but during his time as prime minister, Janša publicly discredited civil society, attacked the media and engaged in high-level corruption (Fink-Hafner 2024). In Poland, the United Right coalition led by PiS had two full terms (2015–019 and 2019–2023) to enact the authoritarian playbook. They aggressively pursued judicial reforms and highjacked public broadcasters. Their illiberal agenda also led to shrinking civil spaces and state capture (Sadurski 2018). After parliamentary elections in 2023, a broad opposition alliance managed to form a majority government, but they are still struggling to overcome the legacy of the PiS era.

Wrestling with illiberal populism is a process of two steps forward, one step back: while Slovenia and Poland ousted their autocratic leaders, Robert Fico (Direction — Social Democracy, SMER), an ally of Viktor Orbán (Gizińska & Dębiec 2024), celebrated electoral success in Slovakia. On top of that, with increasing political pressure in the media sector and the ongoing normalisation of the far-right, Greece and Italy have become new causes for concern. The 2024 edition of the *Rule of Law Report* only confirms these worrisome observations (European Commission 2024). The threat of creeping autocratisation in Europe is real.

Lessons learnt from Hungary and Poland

The examples of Hungary and Poland teach us that democratic subversion often starts with the dismantling of the rule of law. Without checks and balances and an independent judiciary, a power grab in the realms of the media, civil society and political competition becomes easier. This modus operandi eventually led to a collision course with the EU, which triggered sanctions against Hungary and Poland under both Article 7 of the EU treaties and using the rule of law conditionality mechanism. The two countries were often lumped together. Yet today Poland is on course for a democratic resurgence, whereas Hungary continues its drift away from democratic standards. What differentiates the two cases?

First, in 2010, the sweeping electoral victory of Fidesz gave them a two-thirds majority in parliament and absolute power to create the foundations of a new regime, which included passing a new constitution. The PiS party was less lucky, even though in 2015, it acquired both a majority in parliament and the president's office. Despite PiS's political takeover of the judiciary, partisan state capture in Poland did not advance as far as in Hungary.

Second, the PiS-led government in Poland was less successful at shrinking civil society and monopolising the media than Orban's regime. Despite being heavily polarised, public debate in Poland was still pluralistic. Although the Polish public service broadcasting fell political loot, in Hungary, 80 per cent of the media market is now controlled by circles close to Fidesz (Reporters Without Borders 2024).

Finally, Poland has a party-list proportional representation electoral system for the lower house of parliament (*Sejm*), which is more powerful than the upper house (*Senat*) whose members are elected in single-seat constituencies. Polish opposition was also spread across the country. In Hungary, Fidesz dominated outside Budapest. The Hungarian electoral law for a unicameral legislature (*Országgyűlés*) is also more complex, with

members elected using a system of mixed proportional representation, including a first-past-the-post system. As a result, the Polish opposition, despite unfair campaigning conditions, had a greater chance of winning more seats countrywide. And thanks to unprecedented voter mobilisation, they achieved it (National Electoral Commission 2023). The peaceful transition of power in Poland was the first step towards halting and reversing democratic backsliding.

Building democratic resilience

The spreading practice of subverting democracy not by violence but through autocratic legalism and the growing number of backsliding countries have made democratic decline a burgeoning area of policy analysis and academic research. Nevertheless, the other side of the equation – democratic resilience – shouldn't be neglected.

The rule of law is the backbone of every democratic system. The institutional framework and legal design based on democratic principles serve as the foundation for the functioning of the state. Nevertheless, laws and institutions are only as strong as the integrity of those in power. The pillars of democracy – organised civil society, independent media and free and fair elections – can slow down or even stop an intentional undermining of the rule of law. They not only act as watchdogs and whistle-blowers, but also as democracy defenders, when need be.

The opposite examples of Poland and Hungary suggest that strengthening democratic resilience must be anchored in society. There are legal pathways to improving checks and balances and the functioning of the rule of law. Policies for promoting democracy are equally important, as they can equip citizens with the sensibility and courage to act when democracy is under threat. Democracies are resilient if their principles are internalised and lived out not only from the top down but also from the bottom up.

Promoting civic education and participation, supporting a pluralistic media landscape and securing electoral integrity demand immediate attention to successfully counter the illiberal wave in Europe and beyond.

→ Maria Skóra is an independent advisor, serving as an affiliated researcher at the Institut für Europäische Politik and a policy fellow at Das Progressive Zentrum in Berlin.

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What does it take to engage successfully in politics?

"Political commitment and engagement requires nothing more than the deep wish to change our society for the better. You don't need a special job title or a diploma — rather, you need perspectives that are as diverse as our society! I thus hope that even more young people, and especially young women, will capture more spaces and projects. They need to bring in perspectives that have often been overlooked so far."

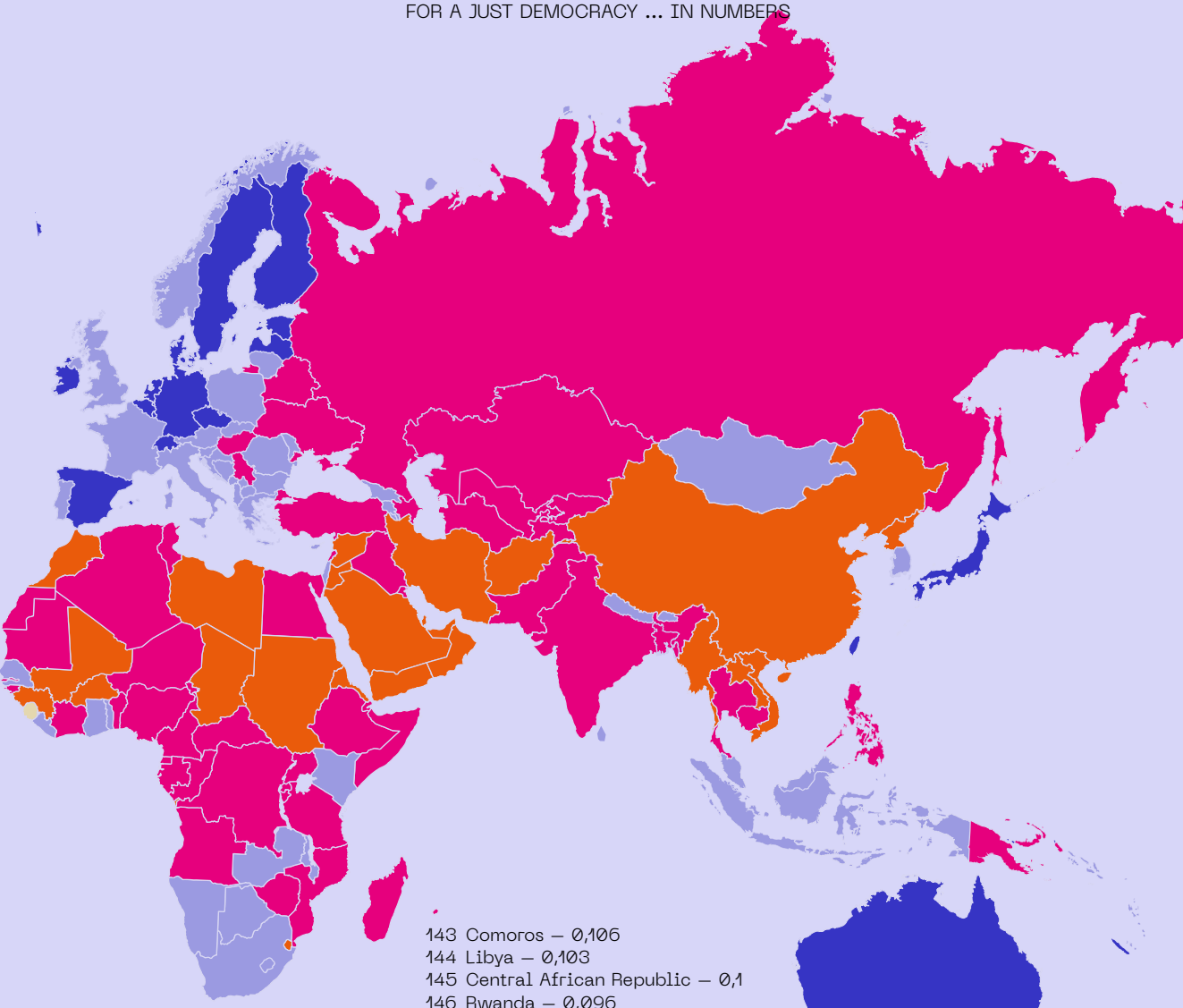
Helen, 23 years old, a student and the youngest member of the SPD parliamentary group in the Hamburg-Nord district assembly.

Measuring democracy is less straightforward than for other variables like economic indicators. Democracy encompasses multiple dimensions, such as minority rights, integrity of elections and freedom of speech. V–Dem has emerged as the most important democracy index because it measures democracy across these various dimensions. To create its democracy scores, V–Dem relies on the answers to questionnaires given by country experts.

Government regimes worldwide

2023 Ranking with total score

1 Denmark – 0,883
2 Sweden – 0,852
3 Estonia – 0,845
4 Switzerland – 0,844
5 Norway – 0,836
6 New Zealand – 0,831
7 Ireland – 0,831
8 Finland – 0,82
9 Costa Rica – 0,816
10 Belgium – 0,814
11 Germany – 0,812
12 France – 0,81
13 Czechia – 0,805
14 Australia – 0,804
15 Netherlands – 0,8
16 Luxembourg – 0,798
17 Chile – 0,786
18 Austria – 0,773
19 United States of America – 0,772
20 United Kingdom – 0,772
21 Uruguay – 0,77
22 Latvia – 0,768
23 Italy – 0,757
24 Spain – 0,757
25 Canada – 0,755
26 Portugal – 0,751
27 Iceland – 0,744
28 Slovakia – 0,739
29 Lithuania – 0,735
30 Japan – 0,731
31 Taiwan – 0,722
32 Brazil – 0,692
33 Vanuatu – 0,691
34 Argentina – 0,69
35 Barbados – 0,678
36 Jamaica – 0,678
37 Seychelles – 0,659
38 Slovenia – 0,653
39 Cape Verde – 0,648
40 Malta – 0,64
41 Croatia – 0,639
42 Cyprus – 0,636
43 Trinidad and Tobago – 0,635
44 Israel – 0,634
45 Suriname – 0,631
46 Moldova – 0,608
47 South Korea – 0,604
48 Bulgaria – 0,588
49 South Africa – 0,584
50 Greece – 0,582
51 Peru – 0,576
52 Panama – 0,571
53 Colombia – 0,565
54 Sao Tome and Principe – 0,563
55 Ghana – 0,562
56 Nepal – 0,523
57 Namibia – 0,519
58 The Gambia – 0,517
59 Timor-Leste – 0,507
60 Lesotho – 0,503
61 Romania – 0,501
62 Kosovo – 0,494
63 Malawi – 0,485
64 Solomon Islands – 0,481
65 Georgia – 0,473
66 Montenegro – 0,467
67 Ecuador – 0,467
68 Senegal – 0,459
69 Kenya – 0,456
70 Maldives – 0,453
71 Bhutan – 0,445
72 Poland – 0,444
73 Dominican Republic – 0,438
74 Liberia – 0,436
75 Botswana – 0,434
76 Paraguay – 0,426
77 Zambia – 0,424
78 Armenia – 0,422
79 Sri Lanka – 0,421
80 Fiji – 0,41
81 Mongolia – 0,405
82 Albania – 0,402
83 Honduras – 0,394
84 Tanzania – 0,39
85 Sierra Leone – 0,384
86 Papua New Guinea – 0,383
87 Mauritius – 0,36
88 Indonesia – 0,36
89 Malaysia – 0,359
90 North Macedonia – 0,359
91 Bolivia – 0,353
92 Bosnia and Herzegovina – 0,346
93 Guyana – 0,332
94 Singapore – 0,331
95 Nigeria – 0,327
96 Hungary – 0,325
97 Benin – 0,325
98 Kuwait – 0,313
99 Guatemala – 0,309
100 Tunisia – 0,301
101 Mexico – 0,299
102 Philippines – 0,287
103 Niger – 0,282
104 India – 0,275
105 Jordan – 0,253
106 Serbia – 0,253
107 Ivory Coast – 0,253
108 Morocco – 0,249
109 Ukraine – 0,249
110 Somaliland – 0,247
111 Madagascar – 0,241
112 Lebanon – 0,237



113 Guinea-Bissau – 0,233
114 Zanzibar – 0,23
115 Thailand – 0,228
116 Mozambique – 0,221
117 Uganda – 0,217
118 Togo – 0,215
119 Pakistan – 0,212
120 Iraq – 0,21
121 Kyrgyzstan – 0,199
122 Mauritania – 0,184
123 Burkina Faso – 0,182
124 Gabon – 0,175
125 Zimbabwe – 0,174
126 Angola – 0,173
127 Mali – 0,148
128 Kazakhstan – 0,144
129 Palestine/West Bank – 0,138
130 Oman – 0,137
131 Somalia – 0,136
132 Cameroon – 0,131
133 Egypt – 0,129
134 Hong Kong – 0,124
135 Djibouti – 0,122
136 Democratic Republic Congo – 0,122
137 Algeria – 0,121
138 Republic of the Congo – 0,119
139 Vietnam – 0,114
140 Türkiye – 0,113
141 El Salvador – 0,111
142 Ethiopia – 0,11
143 Comoros – 0,106
144 Libya – 0,103
145 Central African Republic – 0,1
146 Rwanda – 0,096
147 Bangladesh – 0,096
148 Laos – 0,095
149 Eswatini – 0,094
150 Guinea – 0,088
151 Qatar – 0,085
152 Iran – 0,082
153 Uzbekistan – 0,081
154 United Arab Emirates – 0,078
155 Palestine/Gaza – 0,07
156 Haiti – 0,066
157 South Sudan – 0,065
158 Azerbaijan – 0,064
159 Russia – 0,062
160 Burundi – 0,059
161 Cuba – 0,058
162 Equatorial Guinea – 0,057
163 Cambodia – 0,057
164 Venezuela – 0,055
165 Bahrain – 0,054
166 Syria – 0,054
167 Yemen – 0,048
168 Chad – 0,047
169 Saudi Arabia – 0,046
170 Sudan – 0,046
171 Tajikistan – 0,041
172 China – 0,037
173 Turkmenistan – 0,036
174 Belarus – 0,036
175 Afghanistan – 0,03
176 Nicaragua – 0,027
176 Burma/Myanmar – 0,016
176 North Korea – 0,015
176 Eritrea – 0,01

The ranking lists the 2023 V-Dem democracy scores for each country. A value of 1 means that liberal democracy is perfectly realised in a country, while a value of 0 indicates that the country is a full autocracy.

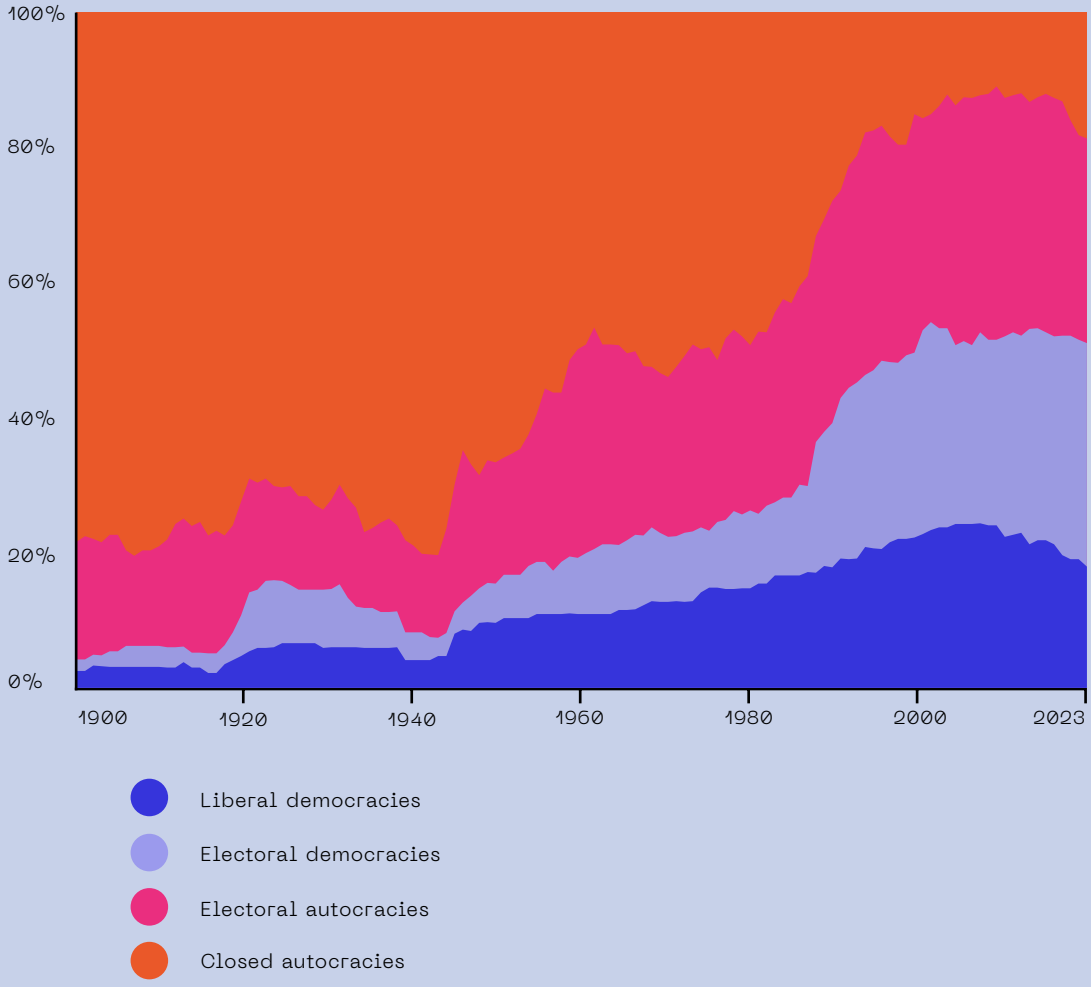
Liberal democracies: free and fair popular elections and rule of law

Electoral democracies: free and fair popular elections but lacking rule of law

Electoral autocracies: popular elections but not free and/or fair

Closed autocracies: no popular elections

Democratisation since 1900



The total number of democracies have experienced an upward trend in the 20th century. But after each of the three waves of democratisation, the number of democracies has decreased again, with some newly democratised countries returning to autocracy. The first "slow" wave of democratisation (not shown) occurred in the 19th century when a small number of countries gradually began to introduce universal male suffrage over the course of a century. In the graph, only the second and third waves of democratisation are visible, which took place from around 1945 to the 1960s and from the mid-1970s until the turn of the century, respectively.

All data were retrieved from V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy).
https://www.v-dem.net/

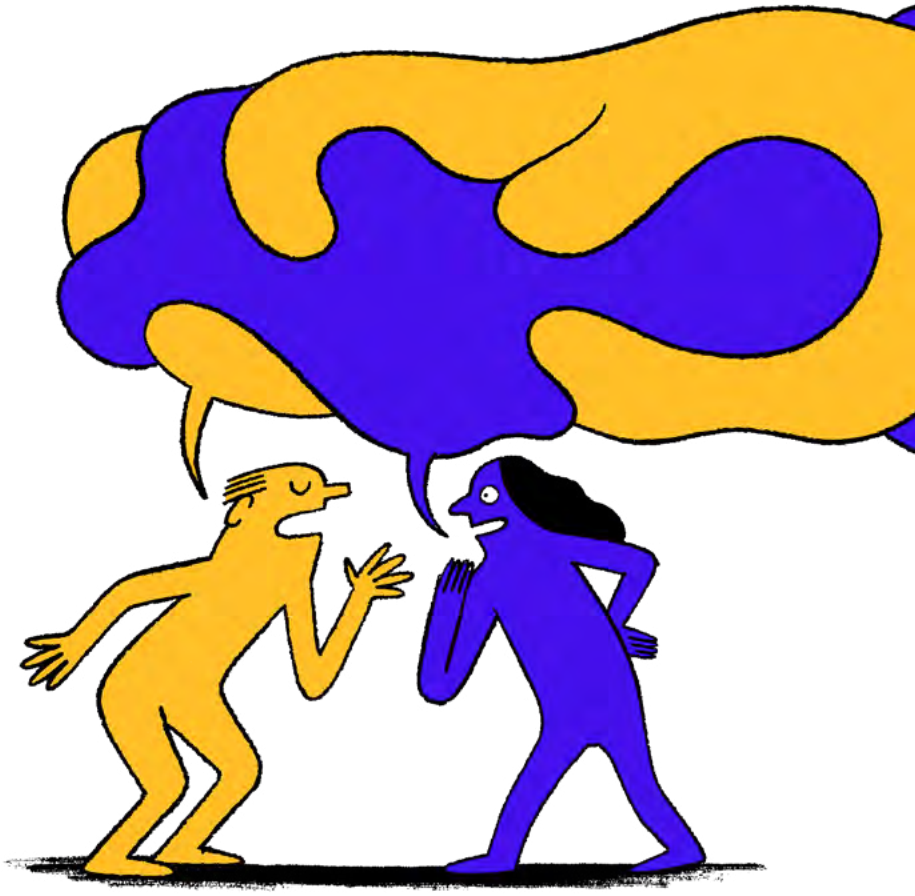
What does it take to engage successfully in politics?

"You need knowledge, clear objectives and endurance to be successful in political activities. Only if you are well informed, organised and do not get discouraged, you can achieve lasting change. Furthermore, cooperation, strong communication skills and access to resources are key to really putting your ideas into practice."

Youri, 20, is studying socio-economics in Kiel and completed a voluntary social year at BKHS.

TEXT: CHIARA ROSSELLI AND ISOTTA RICCI BITTI

Despite widespread calls for bridge-building across political divides, we remain uncomfortable with engaging in real dialogue that isn't merely performative. This weakness in our political culture has become an existential threat to democracy.

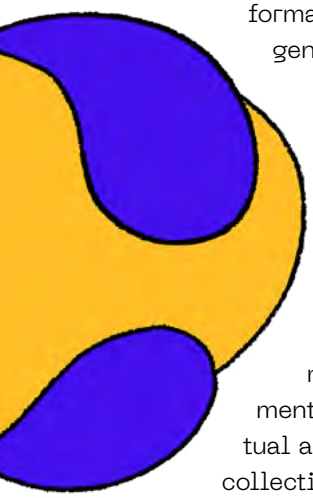


DIALOGUE SINE QUA NON: NO JUST DEMOCRACY WITHOUT ENGAGEMENT

In France, 56 per cent of people believe their society is so divided that they can no longer move forward together (Lefevre 2024). By sharing this finding from recent research into French public opinion, Mathieu Lefevre from the non-profit *More in Common* challenges us with a question: are we addicted to constant opposition?

Over the years, we have heard much lip service paid to bridge-building across political divides and the need to break out of our echo chambers to engage with people whose views differ from our own. Polarisation is among the most cited political challenges of our times. While we seem to support the idea of engagement with the other in

theory, what we are actually comfortable with is an abstract and sterile version of dialogue. More often than not, we think of dialogue as a means to convince the other side of *our truth*. This is a very human error: idealising a version of dialogue that feels comfortable and yet is largely performative. It occurs because real, generative dialogue that deeply challenges our values, identities and self-worth, with no assurance of "winning" is discomforting and, if we care deeply about the issue under discussion, can be terrifying.



Yet, dialogue is not primarily a tool to reach agreement. Instead, it is an intellectual and deeply human exercise in collective sense-making. This fundamental misunderstanding about the function of dialogue is fuelled by a grave cognitive dissonance. We claim to want bridge-building exchanges and a pluralistic democracy which is open to the perspectives of others, but we tend to resist real dialogue, driven by the urge to confirm rather than challenge our views. This tension has become a dangerous threat to our democracy.

Dialogue in today's political climate

In the current era, the intricacy and interconnected nature of political challenges denies us the luxury of simple solutions. This complexity often leads to political outcomes which disappoint voter expectations, further dividing societies into polarised camps. In this context, dialogue and dialectic instruments are critical not only for what they deliver, but also for what they represent.

It is only through dialogue and deliberative inquiry that we can aspire to more intelligent, nuanced policies, while also defending the legitimacy of the democratic process itself, even when the political outcomes aren't what we hoped for.

Advocating for real dialogue in our political climate is increasingly risky, as engagement and compromise are seen as necessary evils, rather than the very litmus test of a functioning democracy. We perhaps prefer not to be reminded that democracy's legitimacy comes from its ability to accommodate and manage conflict, as theorised in Chantal Mouffe's "Agonistics": it is a key task of democracy to build institutions that allow us to manage conflict with the other — as 'adversaries' rather than 'enemies' (Mouffe 2013). If we approach politics without this mindset, and without understanding the central role that conflict must play in advancing democracy, regardless of policy or electoral outcomes, we have already lost. Without the ability to engage, constructively, with difference, we are abdicating the very essence of what it means to practice democracy.

In defence of dialogue

We believe dialogue is not just a "nice to have", but a utilitarian and ethical necessity. It is impossible to imagine a just democracy without it.

Dialogue is a utilitarian necessity, an essential tool to sharpen our political thinking. Engaging in dialogue sharpens one's own policy ideas, vision and values. Avoiding engagement with opposing views diminishes our capacity to shape a more informed and cohesive future. In an era where the political solutions available seem unsatisfactory, dialogue is a unique and powerful diagnostic instrument to refine our understanding of and dissect political problems and narratives. It is an instrument which we believe, following Weber's "ethics of responsibility" (Weber 1919), political actors cannot responsibly opt out of using.

Dialogue is an ethical imperative, the foundational value on which democracy is built. For a democracy to function, dialogue is a non-negotiable value. At its core, it represents our ability to recognise the humanity of others and the inherent trade-offs which are inescapable in any democratic community. In times of profound division, it is one of the instruments that can act as an antidote to violence. Recent political violence, such as the assault on Capitol Hill and the assassination attempts on Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico and Donald Trump, to name a few, highlights the dangers of a

society that is increasingly desensitised to political aggression and which has lost touch with the democratic principle of dialogue as a non-violent alternative to conflict management. This defence of dialogue is rooted in what Max Weber would call an "ethics of conviction" (Weber 1919): by upholding dialogue we demonstrate a commitment to democracy, even if it means facing difficult conversations and criticism.

Where does this leave us?

Weber would say that when faced with an ethical dilemma, such as the one posed by engagement, we need to learn how to oscillate between our convictions and responsibilities. we believe this is best done through practice rather than abstraction. Dialogue, however, represents both: we believe it is an ethical imperative and that we have a responsibility to use it as a tool for improving political thinking and outcomes. To strengthen our political dialogue muscle, we must commit above all to the practice of dialogue.

If we have a clear understanding of why a just democracy requires us to engage, we can accept that dialogue will not always be comfortable or yield the desired results. Far from deterring us, this should motivate us to refine our expertise in dialogue as a democratic tool.

Ten years of experimenting with political dialogue spaces across parties and borders, in the process bringing together hundreds of politicians through the Open European Dialogue project, have taught us beyond a reasonable doubt that dialogue can renew trust, sharpen thinking and refine political vision and values. We believe it is indispensable to invest in gaining a deeper understanding of dialogue and its practical applications in politics. The health of our democracy depends upon it.

In pursuit of this mission, we are launching the Coalition for Dialogue and Cooperation in Politics. This initiative will be a collaborative research and development hub, dedicated to the study of political dialogue and collaboration as well as the development of tools to support effective solution-building for policy-makers. Through our partnerships across Europe and the world, we aim to deliver new knowledge and tools for more constructive political exchanges and to serve and strengthen our democracies at a time of extreme political division.

Dialogue is our most powerful democratic tool, but also the most currently threatened. The time to act is now.

→ Chiara Rosselli is co-founder & executive director of APROPOS – Advancing Process in Politics and head of the Open European Dialogue.

→ Isotta Ricci Bitti is co-founder & managing director of APROPOS – Advancing Process in Politics and deputy head of the Open European Dialogue.

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LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR COALITION FOR DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION IN POLITICS HERE. ↖

What does it take to engage successfully in politics?

"For me, the past three-and-a-half years of activism at Fridays for Future have been shaped by perseverance, hope and fear. It is incredibly difficult to stay positive when we are racing from one catastrophe to the next. Fear of the future is an important driver for political activism; as is the question: if we don't do it, who will? After all, our voice can only be heard if we raise it."

Fanny, 16, has been active with Fridays for Future since she was 12 and has been the spokesperson for Fridays for Future Hamburg for about 10 months.

DEFENDING JOURNALISTIC INTEGRITY IN A BRAVE NEW WORLD

"While We Watched" is a 2022 documentary film by Indian director Vinay Shukla and winner of the 2023 Willy Brandt Documentary Film Award at the Human Rights Film Festival Berlin. The award is the latest in a string of accolades the film has received since its premiere at the 2022 Toronto International Film Festival. The film follows renowned TV journalist Ravish Kumar in his capacity as executive editor and anchor at New Delhi Television Ltd (NDTV) over a period of two years, as he and his team struggle to maintain their journalistic integrity and fact-based reporting amidst India's increasingly politicised and biased media landscape. We talked to Vinay Shukla about his motivations for making the documentary and the significant challenges facing journalists in India today.

Why and how did you decide to realise the project "While We Watched"? The genesis of "While We Watched" wasn't solely about Ravish Kumar or NDTV. It stemmed from a global observation about the changing media landscape and its impact on our lives. News, instead of being a beacon of hope and clarity, was increasingly becoming a cause of anxiety and fear.

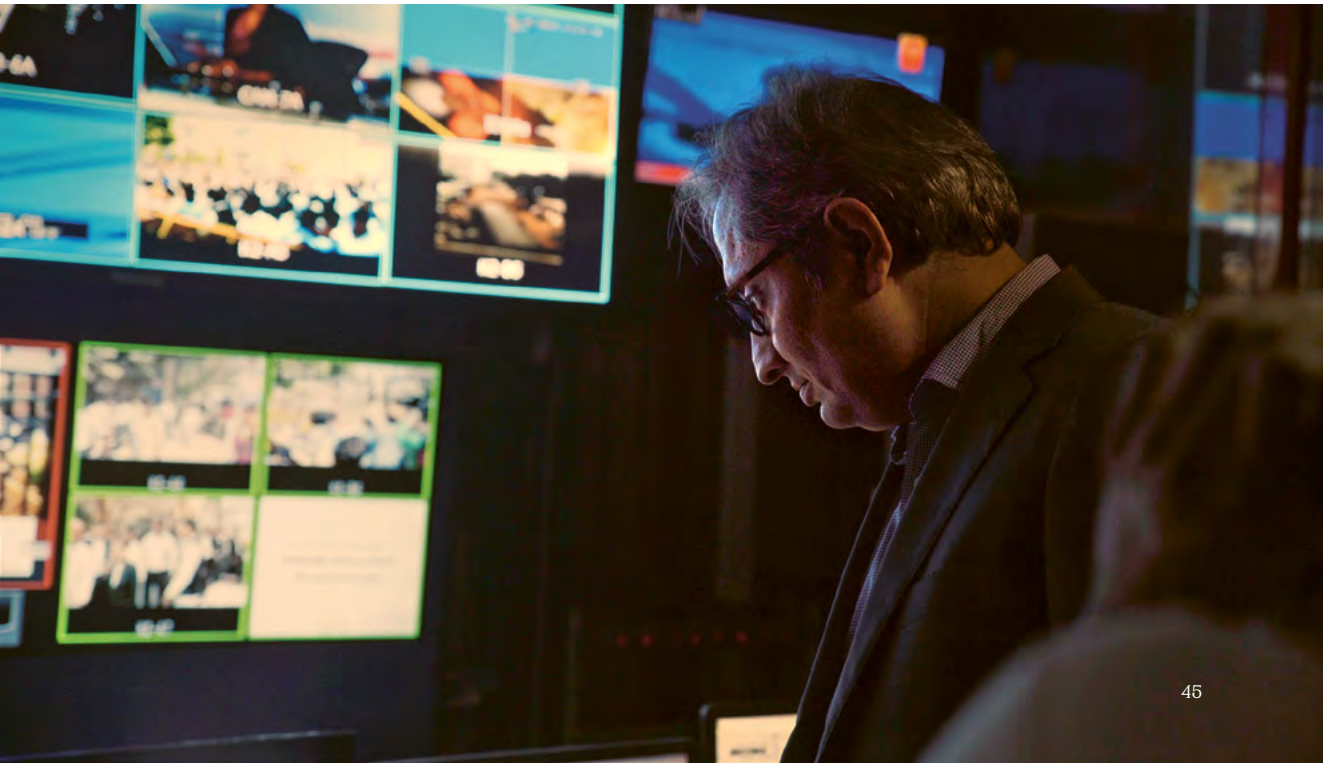
In this context, Ravish Kumar, a journalist known for his integrity and courage, appeared visibly tired, questioning his relevance in a system seemingly losing its way. He became a powerful lens through which to explore a larger story – the loneliness of those who fight against the mainstream, the "vidroh ki mayoosi" (a Hindi phrase meaning "isolation in rebellion") experienced by individuals who challenge the status quo, regardless of their ideology.

The film evolved into an exploration of this universal feeling of disillusionment and the struggle to uphold journalistic integrity in a turbulent media landscape.

Can you share some insights from the journey you took with Ravish? The journey with Ravish was immersive and revealing. For two years, my team and I became shadows, spending eight to nine hours per day documenting his life, both inside and outside of the NDTV newsroom. We were privy to his daily routines, from his early morning reflections penned on Facebook to his meticulously crafted late-night broadcasts.

The filming process was organic. We didn't follow a script and instead opted to capture the raw essence of his experiences. The film mainly took shape during the editing process, where we wove together the immense footage we had collected to create a cohesive narrative.

What is the state of the television news landscape in India? The Indian media landscape, particularly television news, is at a crossroads. While there's a vibrant and diverse media ecosystem, there are growing concerns about the rise of TV propaganda, misinformation and a decline in journalistic ethics. Many news channels prioritise ratings and political agendas over unbiased



reporting. This shift has created a climate of distrust and anxiety among viewers, pushing some to disengage from TV news consumption altogether and move to YouTube and other alternative platforms.

And what role does NDTV have in this landscape? When the film was being shot in 2018, NDTV had long had a reputation as a bastion of journalistic integrity and independent reporting in India. It had consistently striven to uphold journalistic ethics and present a balanced perspective, even when facing pressure from political entities and vested interests.

What are the challenges facing journalists working at NDTV? NDTV journalists, especially those covering sensitive political beats, face numerous challenges: there were external pressures – threats, intimidation tactics and online harassment from political groups and individuals who disagree with their reporting, as well as issues with financial instability – concerns about job security and the sustainability of independent media in a challenging economic climate.

Why is the press in India referred to derisively as "Godi media"? "Godi media" is a derogatory term used to criticise sections of the Indian media perceived as being excessively supportive of the government and its policies. "Godi" translates to "lap" in Hindi, implying that these media outlets act as mere mouthpieces for the government, lacking critical distance and journalistic integrity. This term reflects a growing distrust among some sections of the population towards media outlets perceived as biased and lacking objectivity.

Given the media climate in India, has your movie been released there? After a long international journey, the film was released online in India by the streaming platform MUBI. It has seen spectacular numbers and I'm really grateful to MUBI for having brought the film out in India. I wake up every day to messages in my inbox from audiences who are watching the film and responding to it.

How was it to cover and live with Ravish Kumar, his family, his community at NDTV for almost two years? Spending two years immersed in the world of Ravish Kumar and NDTV was a transformative experience. It deepened my understanding of the challenges journalists face, the personal sacrifices they make and their unwavering commitment to truth-telling, even in the face of adversity.

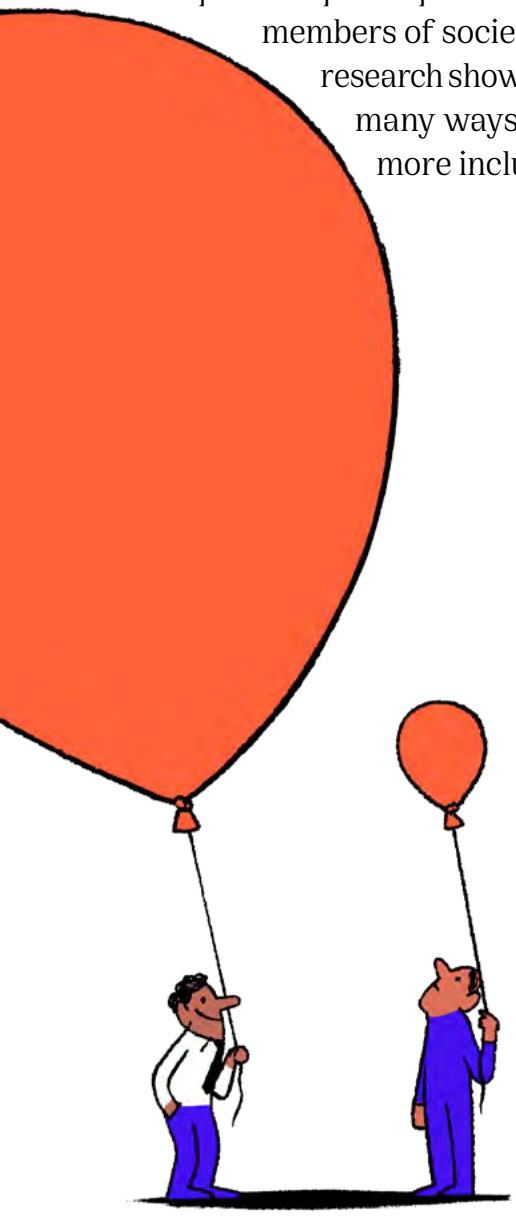
The experience reinforced my belief in the power of storytelling to shed light on crucial issues and inspire positive change. It has been a privilege to document this pivotal moment in Indian media history and contribute to the global conversation about the importance of a free and independent press.

The film ends with Ravish winning the Ramon Magsaysay Award in the Philippines, which is considered the Asian Nobel Prize. Ravish resigned from his position as this renown primetime host on NDTV when it was taken over by the richest man in India, who is allied with Modi. What is Ravish doing now? Since his resignation from NDTV, Ravish Kumar has continued to engage with his audience through his popular YouTube channel, where he shares his analysis on current affairs and social issues. His channel gained more than 11 million subcribers in less than two years. He remains a vocal advocate for press freedom and democratic values, using his platform to challenge misinformation and encourage critical thinking.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE MOVIE AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS FILM FESTIVAL BERLIN HERE. ↖

INEQUALITY: THE BROKEN PROMISE OF DEMOCRACY

If political participation was consistently biased towards the privileged members of society, this would be a democratic disaster. And yet, research shows this exactly to be the case. Fortunately, there are many ways of increasing political equality by constructing more inclusive participatory institutions.



TEXT: EVA KRICK

Democracy embodies the promise of political equality, expressed in citizens' equal opportunity to participate politically. Insofar as the privileged have disproportionate access to and levels of participation in political processes, democracy's promise would be broken.

To be sure, participation will never be completely equal and inclusive. There will always be mechanisms of exclusion at play and who is incorporated into our idea of "the people" can be contested and change over time. Think of the hard-earned voting rights for women or that our understanding of universal suffrage does, for now, not include children, non-citizens or future generations. There are also practical limits to expanding the rule of the people. It is impossible for everyone to co-decide directly on everything that affects them. This would be unfeasible to organise and overstrain the capacities of many citizens.

Patterns of citizen involvement highly unequal across Europe and the US

It seems to be political consensus across modern democracies, however, that the patterns of participation should not be systematically distorted to the advantage of the

Insofar as the privileged have disproportionate access to and levels of participation in political processes, democracy's promise would be broken.

better-off in society. And yet, empirical research shows exactly that. There is some variation between countries and different methods of measuring social inequality, but, overall, in the richer countries of Europe and in the US, the better educated, the wealthier and those with higher-status jobs participate more frequently and intensively (Elsässer et al. 2022; Fatke 2014; Schröder & Neumayr 2023; Schäfer et al. 2020; Setälä 2017). What is more, this effect has been found across different channels of participation, be they elections, popular votes on certain policy issues (referendums), deliberative, dialogue-based forms of engagement (e.g. citizen assemblies) or civic engagement in organised groups (e.g. volunteering, associational membership or going to protests).

This surely is a devastating insight. Yet, rather than discourage us, it should motivate us to increase our efforts to combat this injustice. After all, it is not a natural phenomenon, and therefore it can be changed.

The most straightforward intervention would be to target socio-economic inequalities directly and redistribute economic resources. In addition, societies can promote equal opportunities and social participation by enacting effective anti-discrimination laws and providing inclusive, free-of charge education systems. We can also follow the example of participatory democrats such as Carole Pateman (1970) and pursue "democracy as a way of life" by flattening hierarchies in schools and maximising worker participation, for instance. But even if we aim slightly lower and more directly at channels of political participation, there are many ways of increasing the involvement of marginalised groups in political decision-making.

Institutional changes can reduce the participation gap

The following examples from academic research and political practice point the way towards closing the participation gap: it takes resources and commitment by facilitators and funders of citizen engagement, but sophisticated sampling measures and innovative outreach recruitment go a long way towards making deliberative forums more diverse. The citizen engagement project "Hallo Bundestag" is a particularly well-managed and innovative example. Policy-makers can also open up different input channels with varying entry hurdles and demands to the intensity of involvement, thus combining, for instance, a deliberative citizen assembly with online debate forums, surveys, referendums or stakeholder hearings. A case in point would be the participatory structure that flanked the final storage committee in Germany. Since especially those with fewer resources depend on spokespersons to represent their interests, their efforts to organise as groups need to be publicly supported. This can be done by strengthening these groups' formal involvement rights and channelling

state funding towards their self-organisation. Another option is to set up special councils for the consistently underrepresented and provide trainings for newly appointed representatives (Krick 2021). Examples are the permanent councils for young, elderly and diasabled people on the local level in Norway. In regard to elections, research indicates that voting procedures should be kept simple and mobilisation efforts should focus on young voters. Participation differences along class lines are particularly strong among the youth and whether citizens become habitual voters depends to a considerable extent on their first experiences of voting (Elsässer et al. 2022; Schäfer et al. 2020).

More balanced participation patterns can in fact have a self-reinforcing effect: when the less well-off participate more, policy can be expected to better reflect their interests and reduce social inequalities in the long run. Redistributive policies and experiences of political efficacy, in turn, will likely motivate disadvantaged groups to participate further.

→ Eva Krick is a senior researcher at Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, where she specialises in the study of democracy and participation.

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Do unions pass the vibe check?

Using memes to engage in labour struggle

CURATED BY: MARIEKE PETERSEN

Unions matter. The right to have a say at your workplace is important, not only for your pay cheque, but also in terms of employees' attitudes towards democracy and extremist parties. Better working conditions are linked to higher trust in state institutions and less aversion towards ongoing transformation processes (WSI 2024). Despite their important role in improving working conditions, young people in particular are less and less eager to sign up for a union membership. Therefore, unions are turning to new ways of reaching out to the next generation of workers and are exploring social media as a powerful new platform to address the youth. Through their online presence, unions are able to disseminate information about their work and attract new members. A powerful tool in their arsenal are memes, as they are able to deliver a serious message but with a sense of levity. The images criticise those in power, comment on their mistakes and hypocrisies or point out systemic grievances. In this way they have become a powerful new instrument for mobilisation (Moody-Ramirez & Church 2019).

While some memes refer to country-specific events, like the German train conductors' strike in 2023 or the protest against the Australian Fair Work Commission in 2018, many memes address an international audience. They deal with topics that many people can relate to, such as gender discrimination, union busting or the power imbalance between employers and employees.

By allowing an image to tell the story of easily understood emotions (Jakobi & Barth 2021), unions are making explicit connections to the long, collective struggle for better working conditions and simultaneously passing the torch to the younger generation. Meanwhile, it is not only unions creating labour-related content, but individuals as well are posting their own memes and adding a grassroots dynamic to an international and internet-based struggle.

→ Marieke Petersen was a student assistant at BKHS and a Master's student of Peace and Security Studies.

@Brussels_affirmations
Belgium

Pictures of celebrities or politicians serve as a meme if they look ridiculous or artificially posed. Here, German Minister of Finance Christian Lindner's admiration for the content of his smart phone is used to show how to get through the last hours of a work day.

@aflcio
USA

The largest federation of unions in the US, the AFL-CIO, reacts with the "side-eye" meme to a call from the Libertarian Party seeming to encourage child labour instead of public education: "In the workplace, a child will learn valuable skills they can't apply elsewhere. At public schools, they learn to hate their parents and the very things that make them free."

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Unions are often viewed as a threat by employers because they change the balance of power between management and workers. This sometimes leads union members to act discreetly about their membership or organising efforts.

@trade_union_memes
Australia

Amazon has tried to prevent union organising in the US for a long time. The Amazon Labour Union (ALU) was formed as a response to the lack of proper safety protocols in Amazon warehouses during the COVID-19 pandemic and was the first labour union at Amazon recognised by the National Labor Relations Board.

@gewerkschafts_memes
Germany

The strikes of union workers fighting for their demands often have negative effects on those who rely on their goods and services. Strikes in public transportation in particular are quick to trigger negative reactions towards striking workers because they inconvenience vast swathes of the population. The German train conductors initiated a long period of strikes in 2023, which caused much of the public to criticise them rather than the conditions they were struggling against.

@dasding
Youth channel of the public broadcaster SWR
Germany

Labour-related memes don't always directly reference an ongoing dispute. Memes can also be used to emphasise the necessity of unions. Here, the skincare ad is used to raise awareness for the benefits unions have achieved in the realm of paid time off.

@trade_union_memes
Australia

The meme criticises the turn to easy symbolic gestures instead of initiating long-term change. Women still face entrenched discrimination in the labour market, e.g. through lower wages, unpaid care work or sexual harassment.

@ver.di_jugend
by Ver.di, the youth organisation of the services union Ver.di
Germany

In 2018, the Australian Fair Work Commission (FWC) prohibited a planned train strike, leading the Australian Council of Trade Unions to describe the right to strike in Australia as "nearly dead" (McNally 2018). For a strike to be protected, workers have to obtain permission by the FWC ahead of their action (McCrystal 2018).

@trade_union_memes
Australia

Don't trust "democratic" oligarchs

TEXT: ANASTASIA MGALOBLISHVILI

In Georgia, a pro-Russian government eroded democracy in one of the most anti-Russian and pro-European countries in the world. A closer look into this process can offer valuable insights into how democracies can build resilience against similar illiberal threats around the world.

Confusion and perplexity dominated many Georgia observers after the Georgian Dream government passed a repressive Russian-style "foreign agents" law aimed at silencing and curbing the power of civil society organisations and government-critical groups in the country. The Georgian Dream party, founded by the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, came into power in 2012 with the promise of restoring human rights and furthering Georgia's EU integration. Despite Ivanishvili making his fortune in Russia, his party seemed committed to democracy and Georgia's EU integration, especially given that around 80 per cent of the Georgian public supported the country joining the European Union. Therefore, passing authoritarian Russian-style laws seemed like the last thing on the party's agenda.

Yet, it is precisely this paradox that makes Georgia such an insightful case for democracies worldwide. For years, the Georgian Dream party has been incrementally eroding democracy in Georgia while maintaining a liberal, pro-EU appearance. Understanding how this strategy worked in Georgia and how the opposition, civil society and Georgia's international partners managed to bring about the first cracks in the pro-Russian government can offer valuable lessons on how democracies can build resilience against similar threats around the world.

How Georgian Dream ruled

Despite his business ties to Russia, Bidzina Ivanishvili did not come to power with a pro-Russian agenda. Instead, his Georgian Dream party claimed Georgia's EU integration as its main foreign policy priority when it won parliamentary elections in 2012. During their time in power, Georgian Dream did everything to convince citizens that they were true to their word – they signed the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, amended the Constitution to include EU integration as a constitutional obligation in

Georgia's "civic awakening" after 12 years of public support for a Russia-linked oligarch with authoritarian intentions offers valuable lessons to democracies around the world.

2018 and formally applied for EU membership in 2022. These moves resulted in the EU rewarding them with frequent high-level meetings, praises for their progress and even visa liberalisation for passing a major anti-discrimination law. Even after the government's pro-EU credentials began to look more dubious after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU still granted Georgia candidate status in 2023 for geopolitical reasons.

The rewards and legitimacy that Georgian Dream received from the EU enabled them to convince a large portion of the public of their democratic credentials. Although Ivanishvili's ties to and questionable remarks about Russia did raise some concerns for citizens and international partners, he was able to justify his positions with a realpolitik argument: "We do not want to provoke Russia, so it is better to appease them than confront them." The fear most Georgians have of war after Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia seemed to make this strategy effective, and Georgian Dream doubled down on this narrative after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to its representatives, Georgia was not joining Western sanctions against Russia to avoid a "second front" opening in Georgia.

Their pro-EU façade and realpolitik argumentation enabled Georgian Dream to maintain public support for most of their time in office. At the same time as the government was formally progressing in EU integration and talking the democratic talk, it continued to gradually erode democracy in the country. In its first years in power, this took subtle and outwardly democratic forms, such as bringing charges against political opponents or shutting down media channels after what appeared to be democratic court judgements. The gradual persecution of opponents was followed by massive discreditation campaigns against civil society and the opposition. This proved mostly effective, since the most-watched TV channel in Georgia continues to be owned by one of Georgian Dream's proxies.

First cracks in the system and lessons to democracies around the world

Cracks in Georgian Dream's power base only began to form in the spring of 2024 after they passed legislation that they were unable to justify with either pro-EU rhetoric or realpolitik. The undemocratic and pro-Russian nature of the "foreign agents"

legislation, and how blatantly it undermined Georgia's EU integration process allowed Georgian civil society, opposition and international partners to send clear and unified signals to the public about Georgian Dream's authoritarian, pro-Russian intentions. This resulted in hundreds of thousands of citizens mobilising against Georgian Dream in Tbilisi every day for over a month following the legislation's passage. After a few months, the mass protests transformed into society-wide preparations for Georgia's decisive parliamentary elections. Now that Georgian Dream had shown its real face, Georgian society recognised that everything had to be done to ensure that the party could not retain power and sabotage Georgia's European future.

Georgia's "civic awakening" after 12 years of public support for a Russia-linked oligarch with authoritarian intentions offers valuable lessons to democracies around the world. First, it demonstrates how important unity amongst the opposition, civil society and international partners really is. For years, Georgian Dream's strategy lay in discrediting their opponents and ensuring that no one could accuse them of being anti-democratic or anti-EU. The "foreign agents" legislation finally undermined this delicate balancing act, and the opposition, civil society and Georgia's Western partners managed to mobilise the public around one simple message: the "Russian" law was sabotaging Georgia's chances of becoming an EU member.

Civil society's inability to prevent Georgian Dream from passing the controversial legislation despite mass mobilisations leads to the second lesson for – the second lesson for democracies around the world: do not wait until authoritarianism becomes so blatant and heed the warning signs of creeping authoritarianism. Signs of Georgian Dream's undemocratic, pro-Russian nature were evident from its earliest years and especially after the 2020 parliamentary elections. Raising red flags and sending clear messages about Georgian Dream's authoritarian intentions earlier might have prevented the government from fully consolidating its control over Georgia's state institutions. Instead, the EU and the US frequently legitimised and supported the Georgian Dream government and prioritised stability in Georgia over democracy. This made it more difficult for the public to see the true face of Georgian Dream and for liberal actors to portray Ivanishvili as undemocratic and to mobilise against him.

An additional hurdle in the case of Georgia was that the opposition and civil society groups often could not overcome their differences to unite and offer a credible alternative to the public. This job was made even harder by the fact that most state resources went to discrediting and dividing government opponents. Therefore, the third and final lesson is that the only way to resist and defeat an authoritarian that discredits and divides is to unite and stand together.

At the time of writing, the outcome of Georgia's October parliamentary elections remains uncertain. Therefore, whether Georgia's civic awakening happened just in time or a bit too late is hard to assess. Nevertheless, Georgia's experience offers crucial insights into how to identify and counter the erosion of democracy in other parts of the world – don't trust oligarchs who come to power with a democratic façade, don't wait until authoritarianism is blatant before acting against it and unite the entire array of pro-democratic forces behind a clear opposition strategy.

→ Anastasia Mgaloblishvili is a doctoral researcher at the Berlin Graduate School for Global and Transregional Studies and a ReThink.CEE Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

The holding of elections does not automatically provide for a just democracy. Nevertheless, making use of your right to vote is one of the simplest and most effective ways to create more justice in society according to your own personal understanding. But how just can democracies be if not everyone is allowed to vote? In Germany alone, up to 8.5 million people of legal age would be excluded from voting if federal elections were held in 2024 because German electoral law only grants citizens the right to vote.

One person, one vote!

TEXT: MERLE STRUNK

But not being a citizen is just one of the reasons that stand between people and their suffrage. Gender discrimination, having a disability, homelessness or information and language barriers were and continue to be reasons why people cannot vote or find it more difficult to do so. There are millions of people around the world living in democracies but who still have no say in which politicians represent them. This is not only unfair, it also creates an enormous representation gap in politics.

To realise a just democracy, we need to close this gap between duties and rights. Many initiatives and social movements have been pursuing this goal. In Germany, three groups in particular have been fighting to protect and extend the right to vote over at least 120 years: women, migrants and people with disabilities. And it was never just a national fight that stopped at borders; international affairs and rule-making have played a huge role for these developments. Furthermore, international exchange has repeatedly strengthened these protest groups, even though the fights didn't come without setbacks. Below, we discuss the campaigns of the actors who stood up for equality and representation and thus fought for a more just democracy.

→ Merle Strunk is Education and Knowledge Transfer Officer at BKHS.

1918

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

On November 30, women obtain active and passive voting rights.

§ This right is anchored in Article 109, Paragraph 2 of the Weimar Constitution of August 1, 1919: „Men and women have the same fundamental rights and responsibilities.

In the German Empire, the women's fight for the right to vote began at the end of the 19th century. Activists organised themselves into associations, held international events and wrote political pamphlets. Among them were well-known women's rights activists such as Clara Zetkin, Hedwig Dohm, Anita Augsprung and Marie Stritt. The women were repeatedly ridiculed for their political commitment, but their perseverance paid off. In the elections to the National Constituent Assembly in 1919, women aged 20 or older in Germany were able to vote and to run for election for the first time. The result: the turnout of women was 82 per cent and 37 women entered the parliament of the Weimar Republic.

In Germany, women's suffrage was introduced early compared to other European countries. Liechtenstein was the final European country to introduce active and passive women's suffrage in 1984. Even today, women's suffrage has not been fully recognised worldwide. And in some cases, despite women appearing to have gained voting rights, the details matter. For example, in some places women do not normally have an ID card, yet it is made a perquisite for voting; thus, they are de facto excluded from the electoral process.

FOR A JUST DEMOCRACY!

1992

NON-CITIZEN VOTING

"Every citizen of the Union residing in a Member State of which he is not a national shall have the right to vote and to stand as a candidate at municipal elections in the Member State in which he resides, under the same conditions as nationals of that State."

§ Treaty on the European Union, Article 8b, 1992, German National Assembly, 1918, Paragraph 2

Along with the growing number of immigrants, "guest-worker" communities in Germany from the 1950s onward came the issue of their right to vote. It became especially acute when it turned out that many stayed much longer than expected. Since then, migrant organisations have been fighting for their right to vote in Germany, but so far without success. Only German citizens are allowed to vote in federal elections regardless of whether people have lived in Germany for a very long time, were perhaps even born in Germany or pay taxes here. The situation continues to cause significant frustration and has an impact on approval of and trust in democracy. In 1989, the federal state Schleswig-Holstein introduced municipal voting rights for foreigners. However, the Federal Constitutional Court overturned the reform shortly afterwards, arguing that when the Basic Law states "All state authority is derived from the people", "the people" means German citizens. This decision was fiercely debated. Finally, with the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the right to vote in local elections was introduced for citizens of EU states. It represents an important step, but one that also increased the perception of injustice among non-EU citizens. Therefore, initiatives continue to fight for the right to vote regardless of passports. They draw attention to their concerns with campaigns such as symbolic elections, in which people without suffrage are able to show who they would vote for if given the opportunity.

2019

VOTING RIGHTS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

"States Parties shall guarantee to persons with disabilities political rights and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others. "

§ UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 29, 2006

People with disabilities who are legally assisted in all matters were not allowed to vote in Germany. Since the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was ratified in the country in 2008, the demands for equal rights had reached a new level because the exclusion of people with disabilities from voting could be seen as a clear violation of the convention. The Federal Election Act was finally amended in 2019. This meant that over 80,000 people immediately became first-time voters. Still, many polling stations are not easily accessible and information is not always provided in simple language or sign language. Beyond voting, social and political participation is also not often barrier-free. It can be difficult for people with disabilities to pursue a political career: today, only 3.2 per cent of members of the German Bundestag have a disability. If parliament represented the average of the entire population, the share would have to be 9.5 per cent. If we look at the rest of the EU, we also see a mixed picture. For example, in some European countries, only one person is allowed in the polling station at a time. As a consequence, people with disabilities who need assistance are excluded from voting when no alternative such as postal voting is offered.

Taxes and democracy are historically interlinked. Progressive taxes in particular provide redistribution and thus ensure the principle of political equality not being rendered absurd due to financial inequalities. How did this relationship come about – and can taxes also contribute to solving current global problems?

Democracy is built on taxes

TEXT: MARC BUGGELN

Taxes are a crucial way of preventing the emergence of extreme economic inequality in capitalist democracies. Since there is a risk of economic inequality transforming into political inequality, taxes are also an essential element in safeguarding (at least to some extent) the democratic promise of political equality. The historical relationship between taxes and democracy is therefore very close.

The tax state is a historically recent, i.e. modern phenomenon. It emerged in Western Europe in the 16th century, well before modern democracy. According to the historical sociologist Charles Tilly, European states in the early modern period had three options of financing their survival: a) the state produces the needed resources itself, b) the state appropriates resources by force and coercion, c) the state taxes its subjects. According to Tilly, paths a) and b) prevent the emergence of democracy, while path c) makes it more probable. This is because taxes ultimately require the consent of large sections of the population, and the transfer of money to the state also encourages a desire to participate and have a say in the state's use of this money.

Increasingly progressive tax systems

However, the tax systems of the 17th and 18th centuries actually increased inequality, as the richest were exempt from taxation and consumption was taxed particularly heavily. The French Revolution was to a large extent a revolt against these conditions. First off, it had become known that the king was spending a considerable amount of state revenue on luxury consumption. Second, consumption taxes for ordinary people had been steadily increased. Consequently, all indirect taxes on consumption and all tax exemptions for the nobility and clergy were abolished after the revolution. The overall aim was to establish a proportional tax system in which each person had to pay an equal share of their income and wealth in taxes.

In the first half of the 19th century, however, it became clear that a proportional tax system was not sufficient to limit the effects of industrialisation which widened the gap between the poor and the wealthy. As a result, calls steadily increased for a progressive tax system, in which the rich have to pay a larger proportion of their income in taxes than the poor. Initially, most of these demands came from the emerging labour movement. The Communist Manifesto, written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848, in particular gave the labour movement a strong voice. Its second most important political demand was a "heavy progressive or graduated income tax".

Until World War I, however, parties emerging from the labour movement did not make it into government. It was therefore mainly bourgeois parties that introduced a progressive income tax in the leading industrialised nations at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Until 1914, however, the maximum tax rate did not exceed 10 per cent anywhere. It was not until the war that the top rate was increased to 77 per cent in the US and 60 per cent in the UK. In Germany, Finance Minister Matthias Erzberger pushed through a groundbreaking tax reform shortly after the end of the war. The joint effort by Social Democrats, left-wing liberals and the Catholic Centre Party (Zentrumspartei) resulted, among other things, in the top income tax rate being raised to 60 per cent.

Tax rates were increased again during World War II. In the US and UK, the top rate stood at over 90 per cent at the end of the war. In the leading industrialised nations, the progressive income tax – the core of the redistributive tax state – was supported by progressive inheritance and wealth taxes as well as corporate taxes. In the newly established Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the top tax rate initially reached 95 per cent due to increases by the Allied institutions, but the subsequent conservative CDU-led governments reduced this rate to 58 per cent in the 1950s. The FRG thus had a comparatively low maximum tax rate among OECD nations. Nevertheless,

The considerable "super wealth" among the top one per cent also carries the risk of financial power being transformed into political power.

the tax system in Germany – as in the other OECD nations – was characterised by redistribution from the top to the bottom. This policy was comparatively conflict-free because the high growth rates of the 1950s and 1960s brought significant increases in income to almost all sections of the population.

Growing inequality and the rise of neoliberalism

When the social democratic SPD assumed the office of chancellor for the first time in the history of the FDR in 1969, there were calls to actively promote the social aspects of democracy by means of a more progressive tax system. However, from the 1973 oil crisis onwards, the era of high growth rates and thus also relatively stable public finances had come to an end. As a result, the coalition governments of SPD and the liberal FDP introduced only one reform which made the tax system moderately more progressive in 1974.

The weak growth rates in the 1970s as compared to the previous two decades favoured the rise of neoliberal ideas. In the area of taxation, this meant dismantling the progressive tax system. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan each lowered the top tax rates in the UK and the US by around 50 percentage points. They thus spearheaded the ongoing dismantling of progressive taxation in OECD countries.

This has contributed to a significant increase in social inequality in most OECD countries. The considerable "super wealth" among the top one per cent also carries the risk of financial power being transformed into political power. Progressive taxes can limit this danger, at least at the national level. In Germany, for instance, two examples are a reintroduction of the wealth tax or a cancellation of the corporate exemption rules for the inheritance.

However, in view of the climate crisis and global tax evasion, not only national, but also international solutions are needed. Whether taxes can also be a tool for global redistribution is hardly foreseeable yet because they require a considerable degree of international cooperation. Nevertheless, they would undoubtedly be a democratic and (if designed appropriately) fair means of globally redistributing the costs of addressing major challenges like the climate crisis..

→ Marc Buggeln is Professor of Regional Contemporary History and Public History at the European University of Flensburg as well as director of the Research Centre for Regional Contemporary History and Public History in Schleswig.

#mentoring for more #equality

Things do not always go well at school... as is the case for 9th grader Tida. When her teacher introduces the ROCK-YOUR-LIFE mentoring programme in class, Tida thinks to herself: "I should get a mentor like that; then things will certainly get better." Pretty smart – because support, understanding and empowerment always make things better, especially at school. The ROCK YOUR LIFE programme provides each student with a permanent mentor for an entire year. Mentors accompany and support, encourage, motivate and understand their mentees – both at school and personally. When Tida meets her mentor Lucienne, the two immediately agree: it's a match! They both have a parent from Guinea who came to Germany to study; they both love art, books and travelling. And they are both committed to educational equality and equal opportunities, which they believe must be an integral part of a just and fair democracy.

LEARN MORE ABOUT TIDA, HER MENTOR LUCIENNE AND THE ROCK-YOUR-LIFE INITIATIVE HERE .↖

What does it take to engage successfully in politics?

"The issue of local public transport is very important to me because we can save CO2 with it. That's why public transport should be expanded better, e.g. with trams. We also need more safe cycle paths in road traffic. To push an issue through politically, you need support, contacts and places to meet."

Eric, 18 years old, is active in the Historische S-Bahn Hamburg association.

Mattis, 18, likes going to the stadium to cheer on FC St Pauli.

"We can stand up for an issue by turning up to vote and expressing our opinion. We can run for election of the student representative at Campus Uhlenhorst. We can also go to demonstrations. And we can take action ourselves, for example by travelling more by public transport, ridepooling and cycling instead of using the car."

TEXT: JOHN AUSTIN

Residents of regions in long-term economic decline are understandably angry and upset about diminished prospects for themselves and their families and the degraded condition of their communities. In order to turn residents' outlook from frustration, resentment and distrust of leaders and institutions to hope, optimism and confidence in democracy leaders must listen, understand and appreciate residents' real worries and frustrations then take small steps to deliver better living conditions and rebuild trust.

MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

The roots of anti-democratic attitudes

Germany and the US, among many nations, are struggling over how to defuse anti-democratic populist movements. People turn to strongmen solutions and anti-democratic authoritarians when they are angry about their lives not being what they think they should be, anxious about the future, feel their status in the world is threatened by change and their communities and life circumstances are diminished.

Behind these attitudes are growing economic inequities, both between different places (e.g. industrial heartlands versus thriving global cities) and within society as a whole. At the broadest level, what is needed is a new round of global reinvestment in people and places that are not finding economic opportunity in a changed, globalised economy and world: an investment in the communities that have fallen from a past prosperity to a current condition where residents feel anxiety over their future prospects. These regions constitute a "geography of discontent", and they are fertile ground for anti-democratic and anti-system demagogues and movements (Rodríguez-Pose, Dijkstra & Poelman 2023).

Healing our politics

This discontent can be turned into optimism and hope. As I recently wrote for Brookings, when done well, place-focused investments can serve to bring new economic promise and identity to regions — like my own industrial Midwest of the US (Austin & Muro 2024). The work to rebuild local economies is taken up by leaders who want to provide a constructive, rather than a mere rhetorical, response to heartland residents' legitimate frustrations and anxieties.

Successful community engagement starts with an openness to constituents, to listen to their concerns, to even "walk a mile" in their jobs and shoes.

Despite the challenges, however, there is much at the nation-state, regional and local levels that can and is being done well to restore optimism, opportunity and hope to residents of still-struggling regions, thereby rebuilding faith in democracy and the leaders and institutions that undergird it. To succeed in this work, leaders need to engage differently with local residents: listening closely, taking small steps that show they understand and empathise with residents' concerns and showing they are serious about finding solutions to their problems.

Lessons for leaders

Leaders who meet people where they are can win back some alienated voters' support, and with it, elections. Leaders who show up in heartland communities, campaign there (and not just during election season) and most importantly listen well in rural and small-town regions, while not winning over every voter, can "lose less badly" than many peers who are viewed as being out of touch, condescending elites. Through transatlantic research, we have learned that local, regional and national leaders who truly listen to – and do not reject – the frustrations and grievances of heartland voters, who embrace and also seek to meet their concerns can restore faith in leadership (Austin, Kreuzer & Lungu 2024).

Leaders can succeed when they not only know their communities, but also know what makes them tick. Successful leaders understand the importance of local institutions that are community-defining points of pride, whether they be schools, sports teams, the pub, theatre, library or a busy and clean main street. Leaders who do more than maintain these institutions, but help them to thrive, can find electoral success. Leaders who bring competence and follow-through to their campaign promises, who do the small things such as making sure there is a functional bus and transportation system – these leaders build trust and get permission to do bigger things that can create renewed community vitality in the longer run.

Successful community engagement starts with an openness to constituents, to listen to their concerns, to even "walk a mile" in their jobs and shoes. One example is given by a US Congresswoman who spends days working alongside constituents in various occupations to know what they face in their life and work. Another US elected official – who keeps winning elections as a Democrat in a region that otherwise votes primarily for Trump and anti-system populists – campaigns by parking his truck on the side of the road with a hand-painted sign with the words: "Stop and talk with your State Senator" (Johnson 2022). Successful community engagement and trust-building is about meeting residents with respect and openness.

Leaders like Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Manchester in the UK, focus on people and pay attention to their tangible and immediate needs. As the Mayor told us in one of our transatlantic discussions: "Start with the little things, fix up and get the graffiti off the high street, get the buses running on time and where they need to be." (Austin et al 2021).

If done well, these small steps build trust between communities and leaders – trust that will nurture support for additional policies and programmes that can move communities forward in more substantive ways, such as with larger-scale investments in people, infrastructure and innovation.

One of the biggest challenges for leaders in communities wracked by job loss is to deal with the feeling of nostalgia – the demand of residents to bring back the past. In part, this nostalgia is very understandable. Industrial

heartland communities whose identity and economy were shaped by industry are home to residents proud of their contributions to their countries' economy and success. People want to be seen and acknowledged for their hard work, not looked down upon or pitied. And wounded pride is one of the principal drivers of the anger and resentment felt by many residents of ignored and declining communities, which compounds as people feel patronised. Successfully rebuilding this pride can be one of the most powerful boosters of industrial heartland regeneration. Effective local leaders find ways to build on the community and its historic roots to reinvigorate residents' pride in themselves and their community.

For example, at another transatlantic event, Mayor Francois Decoster of Saint-Omer in the Haut-de-France, the country's industrial North, described a community renewal process that began with a celebration of their industrial history with a UNESCO world heritage designation. He noted: "We did not do this from the top-down, it was a participatory process. The community asked for and was engaged in the process" (Austin 2022). Successful community redevelopment efforts build resident ownership. Ownership matters for giving people pride in their local communities through bottom-up leadership initiatives and inclusive participation.

There are other things to do that can rebuild connection and faith in leaders and democratic institutions – but the fundamental connection has to be between people. Leaders who listen to and share a worldview with their constituents; constituents who see themselves in those that represent them. This is the glue that binds democratic societies together.

→ John Austin from Michigan, USA, is a Senior Fellow with the Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College and non-resident Senior Fellow with the Brookings Institution. He is the coordinator of the transatlantic Transforming Industrial Heartlands Initiative.

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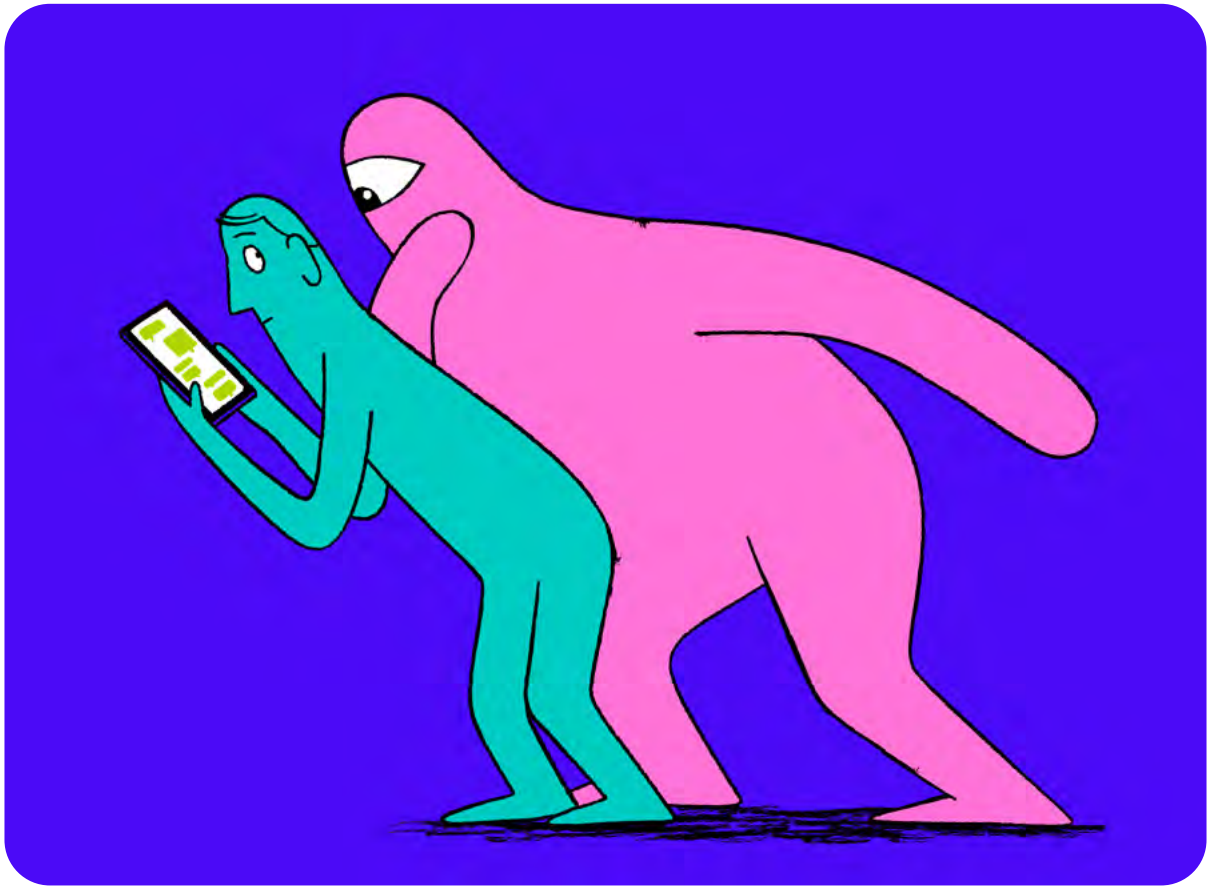
The introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has deeply disrupted our way of producing text and perceiving information. While some hail AI as an omnipotent tool that will improve our way of life greatly, others paint a dystopian picture of biased programmes taking over control. At the moment, many myths on AI need to be debunked for a better understanding of what AI can or cannot do.

TEXT: KATJA MUÑOZ

DISRUPTING DEMOCRACIES? *Myths* on AI in politics debunked



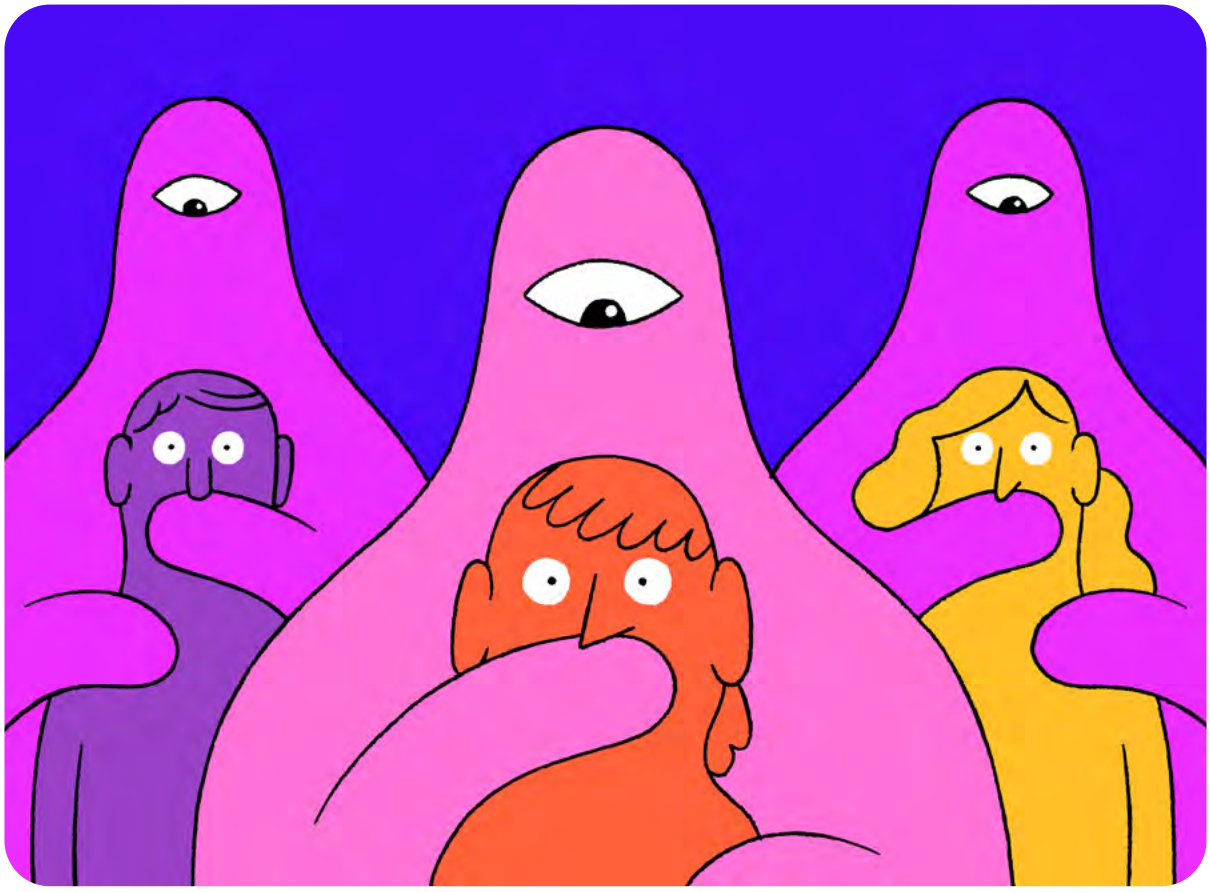
Disguised as "monitoring", AI-based mass screening of social media chats brings the self-censorship of speech to democracies.

FALSE.

This is a claim that, on the one hand, exaggerates the capabilities of AI – or at least the scope of its use – and, on the other hand, goes against the values of democratic governance and the privacy rights of citizens. Democratic countries have laws and oversight mechanisms in place to prevent mass surveillance.

While AI helps enforce content moderation, it's not used for the mass surveillance of private chats. Social media surveillance is mostly platform driven and focuses on public posts rather than private messages, which are often protected by encryption. This provides a strong defence against intrusive surveillance.

It's important to distinguish between content moderation on social media platforms and government surveillance. While concerns about privacy online are valid, the scenario described overstates the threat to free speech in democracies. Robust public debate and legal protections continue to ensure freedom of expression in democratic societies.



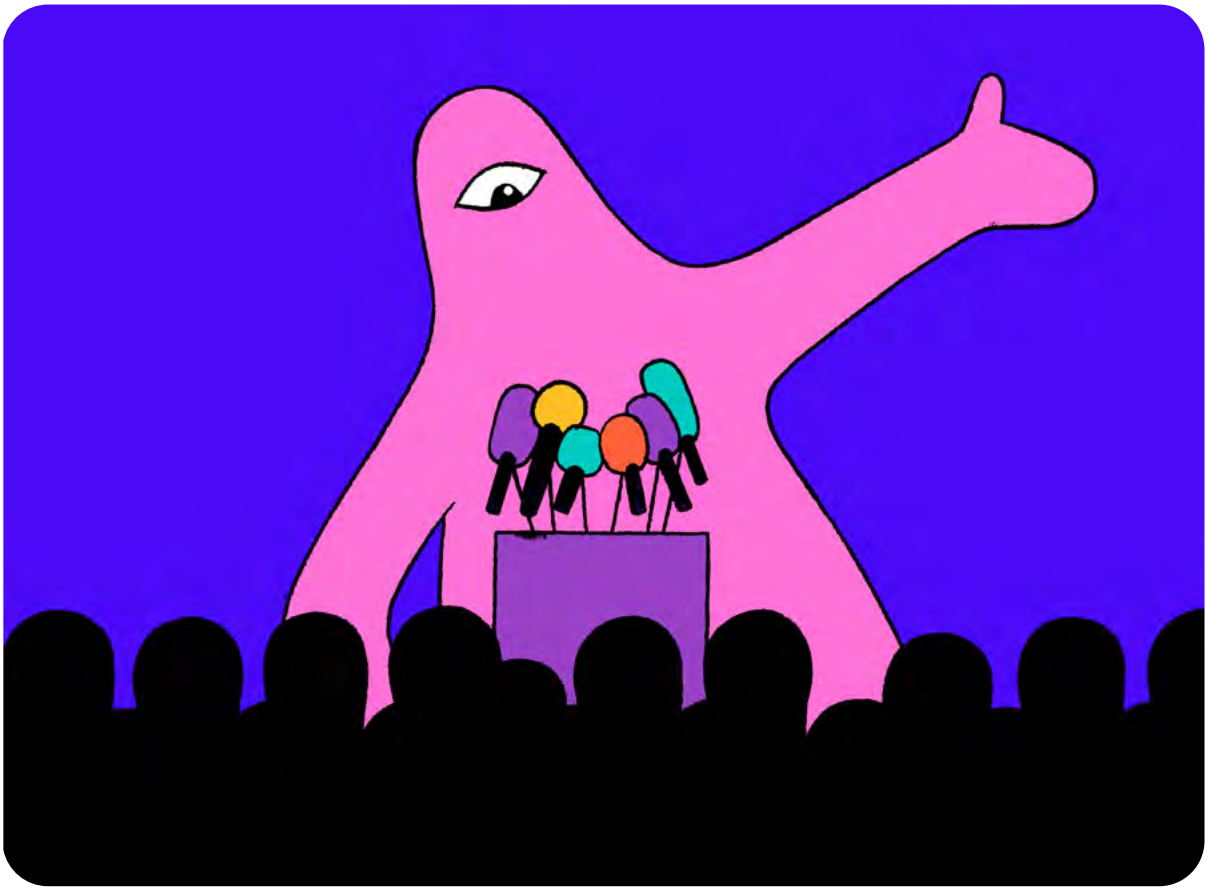
AI can explain politics better than politicians do.

TRUE.

AI can help make complex issues easier to understand. It is very good at summarising large amounts of information and translating technical jargon into simpler language. This ability can bridge the gap between complex policy details and public understanding and is one of the ways in which AI is being integrated into politics to increase political participation.

However, there should always be some form of human oversight to review AI-generated summaries to avoid the oversimplification of nuanced issues and bias. The effectiveness of political communication also depends on its contextualisation and the degree to which it shows empathy and can establish personal connection. Politicians still play a crucial role in communicating the reasoning behind decisions, addressing voters' concerns and providing leadership.

The ideal scenario would be to use AI to improve political communication by making information more accessible while preserving the human aspects of politics. This could lead to a more informed electorate and strengthen democratic engagement.



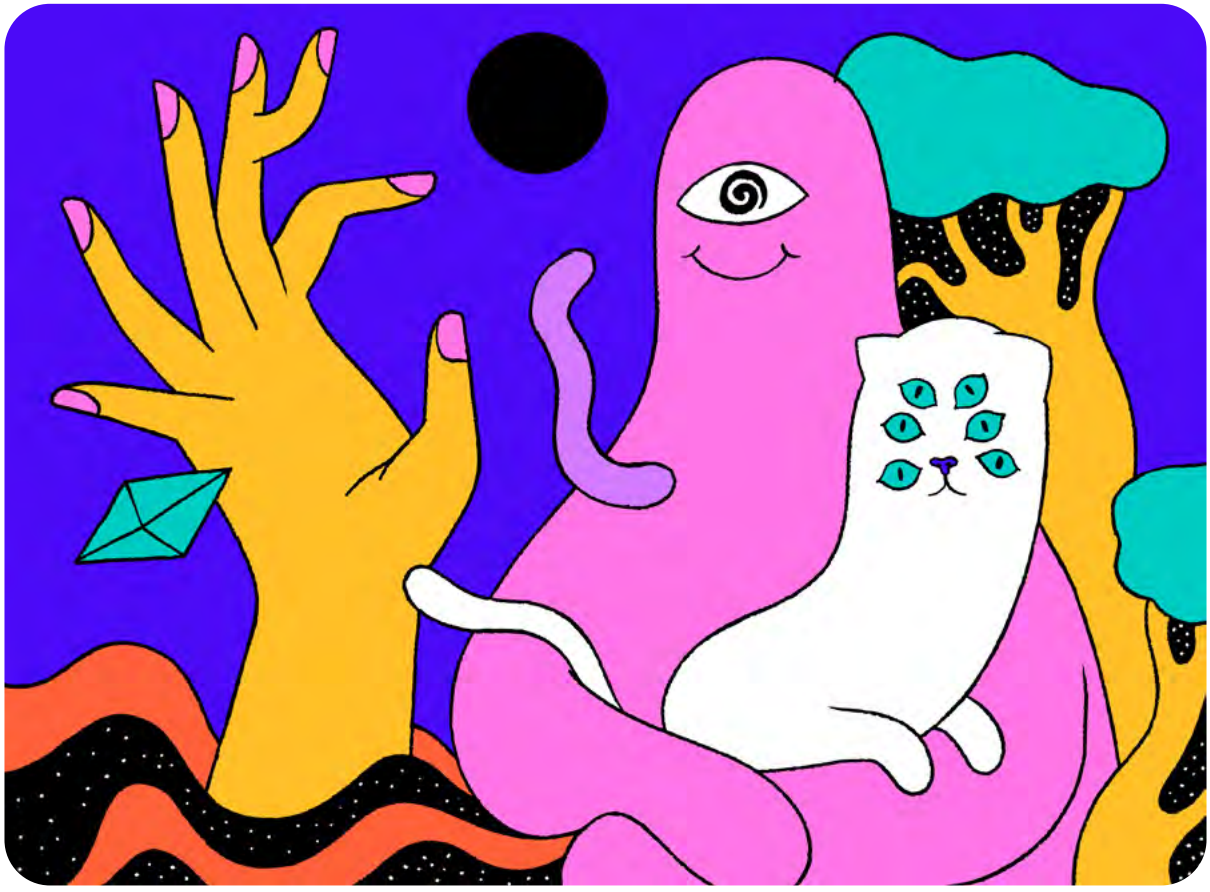
Social media will lose its appeal as a platform for societal and political exchange because AI-powered bots can simply drown out human voices.

FALSE.

So far, AI-powered bots on social media are nothing new and not necessarily bad. However, they are more than a nuisance when used covertly to spread specific narratives, misinformation or propaganda. And while they add a lot of noise to social media ecosystems by skewing perceived public opinion, it's unlikely that they will completely drown out human voices.

Social media has become an essential part of social and political exchange, and most of the major platforms have measures in place to limit bot activity as their detection algorithms evolve. Users are also becoming more adept at identifying and ignoring bot accounts.

One element that should be further developed to counter bot activity is verified user systems to distinguish real accounts from bots, thereby reinforcing the value and irreplaceability of human-to-human interactions. Unfortunately, verification is currently only available as a paid feature or if the user is a public figure.



Generative AI will always be prone to hallucinating and therefore is a risk for spreading misinformation.

TRUE.

GenAI's tendency to hallucinate (generate false or fabricated information) is a major concern.

Current AI models generate content based on statistical predictions and are unaware of their own limitations. They would never answer a question with "I don't know", and they always provide an answer even if it's wrong.

Generated answers, even if incorrect, are very convincing. Because these AI models are very good at being persuasive – they have been trained to answer based on what responses we prefer through a process of reinforcement learning from human feedback – it is easy to be convinced that the given answers are correct.

This can become a problem when users start relying solely on AI models to learn about a subject they are not familiar with. They could receive answers that are incorrect but written in a way that is persuasive, which in turn could contribute to the spread of misinformation, lead to a more informed electorate and strengthen democratic engagement.

AI is the better lawmaker because it looks at different opinions without a personal bias.

MAYBE.

It's true that AI can analyse huge amounts of data and consider multiple perspectives. It excels at identifying patterns, predicting outcomes and detecting inconsistencies in proposed legislation. This ability could help lawmakers identify accidental or deliberate loopholes and assess potential risks more effectively.

Yet, we still need a human in the loop when making decisions in the legislative process. First, AI lacks moral reasoning and can't make the value judgments that are crucial to lawmaking. Second, it doesn't understand the complex social, cultural and historical contexts that shape laws. Third, AI cannot be held accountable to constituents, which is a cornerstone of democratic governance.

And because AI models can still perpetuate existing biases in their training data, they would not be free of bias. In other words, lawmakers could benefit from AI's analytical capabilities, but it will most likely never be the better lawmaker due to its inherent limitations.

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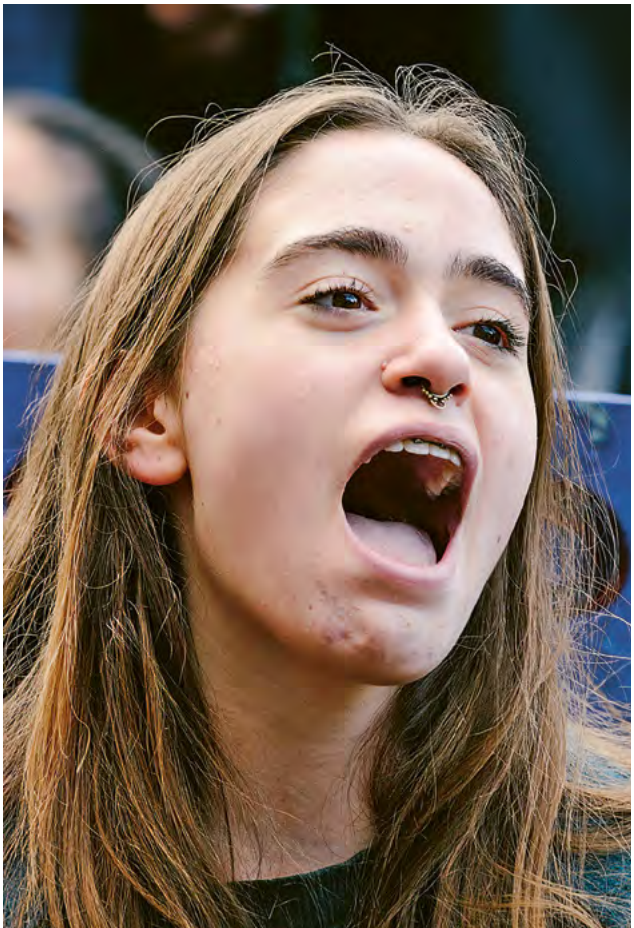
Political debate is in a state of crisis. Healthy debate is being held less and less, in public as well as in private. Yet it is an essential component of any functioning democracy: debates educate, form opinions and connect people.

TEXT: ANDREA RÖMMELE

DEBATE FOR DEMOCRACY!



"A democracy without debate is no democracy." (*„Eine Demokratie, in der nicht gestritten wird, ist keine."*) – This is certainly one of the most famous quotes by the late German chancellor Helmut Schmidt. Assuming the truth behind Schmidt's conviction, it is alarming that constructive political debate is under attack in many of today's democracies. After discussing the current trajectory towards democracies without debate, this essay aims to make a convincing case for pursuing debate in democracy by showcasing three of its essential features.

The current state of debate is a state of emergency

There are numerous arenas where debates in democracies can take place. They are all equally important for forming political opinions, whether they take place in public or in private. In private, we – ideally – debate within our family, with our neighbours, friends and colleagues. We debate during dinner, in the bus or train, over a nice glass of wine or while watching a football match on TV. Why *ideally*? Because what would seem to be self-evident debates in private spaces have become the exception rather than the norm. This development is particularly pronounced in the US, where voters of the Republican and the Democratic parties continue to segregate themselves into communities composed of like-minded individuals.

In modern democracies, the media play a crucial role in connecting citizens to politics and in publicising debates. Walter Lippman once described the media as the "window to the world". Without the media, most of us would hardly have access to politics and would not know much about day-to-day political happenings. Various media debate formats have been invented over the years, the most prominent being televised debates held during election campaigns.

Those who see no possibility of being perceived and heard in social discourse will never see themselves as part of society.

But debates are under attack. Social media in particular has changed how we listen to and watch political debates, how we debate in public and how we engage in debates in private. Social media continues to create more and more filter bubbles and echo chambers that serve solely to support our own views and opinions and shield us from opposing views. It is no longer the most convincing argument that counts, but about who pushes their point of view the loudest and most provocatively. People are debating more radically, are more often in attack-mode and do not treat their counterpart with dignity and respect. All too often, the basis of democratic debate – truth and facts – can no longer be taken for granted, since fake news, deep fakes and "alternative facts" have started to poison political debate.

Why democracy needs debate

Debates serve to educate, help form opinions and connect people. As such, it is an essential component of any functioning democracy. To preserve debate, we need to further understand and embrace the various features of debate.

1. Debates educate!

Ideally, debates in democracies are a contest of arguments for the sake of better policy solutions. The underlying assumption is that through debating and discussing our arguments, our ideas and thinking are improved and become more refined. Controversy in a democracy is therefore not an end in itself, but has an important functional component. The sociologist Ralph Dahrendorf, member of the German Bundestag and the British House of Lords, saw conflicts as "an outstanding creative force of societies" (Dahrendorf 1961).

Compromises are constitutive elements of democracy and can only emerge in the context of a debate. It is possible for both sides to win, for both sides to move closer together or for one actor to step back more significantly from their original demands than another. Only very rarely do the disputants come out of a debate with the same positions and opinions they started off with. If a proposal is criticised by others, then the one making it is forced to take a closer look, question their tried and tested ideas and may even be pushed to explore slightly different or completely new paths. Even if an actor prevails across the board, their position will have changed. One's own point of view crystallises more clearly through confrontations with political opponents. Antagonists force one other to contextualise the issue better, to sharpen their own position and to make their proposed solutions more concrete in order to prevail in the competition of alternatives.

2. Debates form opinions!

The complexity of issues in the political arena makes them almost incomprehensible to non-experts. Debates between political actors allow the public to familiarise themselves with different perspectives on a topic and to adopt the one that comes closest to their own views. Debates reduce complexity, making it possible for citizens to develop their own stance on an issue on the basis of bounded rationality. Debates between political representatives should be conducted publicly to expose citizens to arguments, ideas and suggestions. In a debate, however, it is often not only the argument itself that has the potential to convince citizens and voters. It is also the manner in which the argument is presented. How does the political actor manage the situation with their opponent? How articulate are they? These unpolitical characteristics of a political actor also play an important role in determining their chances of success in convincing citizens of their views.

3. Debates connect!

Every debate makes visible the different points of view of the actors involved, while at the same time uniting them as social actors. Only those who feel heard in the course of a debate are later willing to accept a compromise that is not congruent with their views. In the context of many contradictory positions, in the end it is civilised debate that provides communities with social glue. At the end of the day, we don't have to agree with one another, we don't have to aim for the same solutions, we don't even have to identify the same problems. But we must try to understand what our political counterparts want and why they want it. Those who see no possibility of being perceived and heard in social discourse will never see themselves as part of society. Only by reacting to the plans, ideas and demands of our opponents can we create the basis for social cohesion despite our political differences: by showing that we are prepared to engage with each other. We can accept to "agree to disagree" – but we must not silence our opponents.

→ Andrea Römmele is Dean of Executive Education and Professor of Communication in Politics and Civil Society at the Hertie School.

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My Name Is Foreigner

Benim Adım Yabancı

POEM: SEMRA ERTAN TRANSLATION: FAMILY BILIR-MEIER

Semra Ertan (1957-1982) was an Arab-Alevi poet, worker and activist from Mersin, Turkey. She wrote over 350 poems dealing with her experiences in Germany. At the age of 14, she moved to Germany, where her parents lived as so-called guest workers. Semra Ertan was a pioneer in the fight against the inhumane working conditions of migrant workers and their lack of societal recognition, and she protested against rampant racism and discrimination. In 1982, Semra Ertan died in Hamburg. In 2018, her family founded the Initiative in Memory of Semra Ertan and in 2020, 82 poems in German and Turkish were published for the first time in an anthology by her sister Zühal Bilir-Meier and her niece Cana Bilir-Meier.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT
SEMRA ERTAN HERE.

Benim Adım Yabancı

Burada çalışıyor,
Nasıl çalıştığımı biliyorum.
Almanlar da biliyorlar.
İşim ağır
İşim pis
Beğenmeyince söylüyorum.
“Beğenmezsen dön vatanına” diyorlar.
İşim ağır
İşim pis
Ben de vergi veriyorum diyorum.
Devam edeceğim demeye;
Hep böyle duyarsam
“Kendine başka iş ara”
Fakat kabahat Almanlarda değil.
Türklerde değil.
Türkiye’nin dövize ihtiyacı vardı,
Almanya’nın işçiye.
Türkiye bizi Avrupa’ya yolladı,
Evlatlık çocuk
Lüzumsuz insan gibi.
Her şeye rağmen İhtiyacı vardı, ...
Dövize, sakinliğe ...
Türkiye beni yabancı devlete yolladı
İsmim YABANCI oldu ...

Semra Ertan, 1981

My Name Is Foreigner

I work here,
I know how I work.
The Germans know it too.
My work is hard
My work is dirty
I say I don't like it.
"If you don't like it, go home" they say.
My work is hard
My work is dirty
"I also pay taxes", I say.
I'll say it again and again;
If I always hear
"Find yourself another job"
But the Germans aren't to blame.
Nor the Turks.
Turkey needed currency,
Germany workers.
My country sold us abroad,
Like Stepchildren
Worthless people.
In spite of everything, It was needed for ...
The currency, the calm ...
My country sold me to a foreign state
My name has become FOREIGNER ...

Semra Ertan, 1981

What does it take to engage successfully in politics?

"For me, it is important that political bodies are diverse. This requires overarching dialogues that open up multi-level access to political work. Social platforms such as TikTok can offer an opportunity that is by no means adequate and harbours the risk of populist content and radicalisation."

Lorena, 21, is studying arts research and media philosophy and is an active member of the scouts.

Ukraine's dual challenge:

navigating wartime struggles while safeguarding democracy

Ukraine finds itself in the difficult position of having to continue fighting against Russian aggression while at the same time preserving the democratic gains it's made. Three underexamined challenges Ukrainian democracy is facing are preventing the erosion of human capital, maintaining social inclusion and preserving the 2014 decentralisation reform.

TEXT: PAVLO CHERCHATYI

As the war on Ukraine drags on after two and a half years, the country is facing two primary challenges: First, it has to counter direct Russian aggression. Second, it has to continue on its reform path to safeguard democratic gains and transform its political institutions in preparation for joining the EU.

Even prior to 24 February 2022, Ukraine's path to reforming its political institutions has been far from easy. The country has struggled with anti-corruption and rule-of-law reforms. Under pressure by civil society, however, Ukraine managed to carry out a major decentralisation reform that transferred power from the national to the local level, built a new anti-corruption ecosystem and launched important law enforcement reforms.

The ongoing war has obviously deepened the challenges to Ukrainian democracy. The dual pressures of immediate wartime needs and long-term political reforms create a complex environment for sustaining and deepening democratic principles. Despite these difficult conditions, over 90 per cent of Ukrainians continue to express a desire for Ukraine to evolve into a fully functional democracy, showing that there remains widespread and robust civil society support for a democratic Ukraine (NDI 2023).

The difficulty of holding elections, continuing struggles against corruption and rule-of-law concerns are several of the most talked about challenges for democracy in Ukraine. I will in this essay instead focus on three other, underexamined challenges that are no less important and that will ultimately shape the trajectory of Ukrainian democracy: (1) preventing the erosion of human capital, (2) fostering social inclusion and (3) upholding the 2014 decentralisation reform.

Preventing the erosion of human capital

One of the key challenges currently facing Ukrainian democracy is the depletion of human capital. More than nine million Ukrainians have fled their homes either to other locations in Ukraine or abroad (Hyde 2024). This has put a massive strain on the economy, since many of these people have had to leave their jobs and start over finding new ones. As the war drags on, it is drawing more and more people into the military effort, thereby continuing to deplete human capital needed for the economy or in government. Many activists and reformers who would perhaps otherwise be working on essential legislation to advance Ukraine's democratic path towards the EU are now fighting on the front lines. In addition, there are thousands of people across the country who experience burn-out effects as a result of the war. With millions of skilled individuals having left the country, being internally displaced, serving in the military, or simply being exhausted from the war, how can Ukraine safeguard and continue to develop its economy so that democracy remains resilient?

While the number of people fleeing the country or their homes has steadily decreased over the course of the war, there are still people who choose to leave because of the unstable security situation, especially amidst the recent blackouts and attacks on critical infrastructure (Verbianyi & Safronova 2024). The most straightforward and effective solution would be to enhance Ukraine's ability to protect against such attacks by improving its defence capabilities. This could include, but is not limited to, allowing Ukraine to use long-range missiles on Russian territory to prevent such attacks in the first place. Without addressing this fundamental security issue, all other policies and ideas will not be effective, as economic incentives alone to involve people in work or to stay in the country will not work in times of blackouts.

Fostering social inclusion

Another challenge facing Ukrainian democracy is the need to preserve social inclusion. The war has made veterans, internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well as people with disabilities (PWDs) especially vulnerable and at times excluded them from political decision-making and economic life. As these communities face limited access to job opportunities and have little influence over the policies that affect them, the gap between different segments of the population is becoming wider, creating further social fragmentation. While there are other marginalised groups as well, such as elderly people, the LGBTQI community and Roma, a good first step would be for Ukraine to prioritise supporting the three statistically largest groups: IDPs, veterans and PWDs.

To facilitate their social inclusion, Ukraine should consider implementing quotas in various sectors – in the private economy as well as in state institutions. The current administration could mandate that companies, organisations and government bodies reserve positions for candidates from these groups. Building on gender quotas, political parties could establish quotas for these groups to ensure their representation (Council of Europe Office in Ukraine 2021). This approach has previously been successful in increasing women's political participation in Ukraine and thus is a tested way to enhance the participation and inclusion of vulnerable populations in society. Additionally, the government could strengthen social cohesion through tailored economic development programmes, like micro-grants for business or educational scholarships, as well as launching skills training initiatives for these groups. Fostering commu-

nity participation through citizen councils, civic education campaigns and collaborative projects between government and civil society could further promote integration into decision-making processes and reduce social exclusion.

Upholding the 2014 decentralisation reform

The 2014 decentralisation reform was one of Ukraine's most successful democratic initiatives, but it is increasingly coming under strain. The reform shifted power from the central government to local municipalities with the goal of enhancing community independence and sustainability. Through the reform, municipalities were able to retain more tax revenues locally. However, the ongoing war and martial law have challenged the local governance reform in a number of ways. For instance, it led to instances of central government interference with local authorities (Skorkin 2023), e.g. the dismissal of mayors under the pretext of corruption, which some have labelled as dangerous autocratic tendencies (Segura 2023). Concerns have been raised about the rolling back of progress already made, excessive executive centralisation and the uncertain future of the 2014 reform. In addition, the declaration of martial law has exacerbated the problem of uneven resource distribution, leaving frontline and occupied communities especially underserved (Darkovich & Savisko 2024). This imbalance is compounded by confusion over the roles of local authorities and military administrations, leading to inefficiencies and dissatisfaction at the community level.

To preserve the democratic progress associated with the decentralisation reform, the national government should exercise restraint and continue to strengthen local governance. This includes establishing clear legal guidelines that delineate the responsibilities of local authorities and military administrations, reducing role overlap and guaranteeing effective governance at the local level. The national government should also promote cross-city collaboration, where communities assist each other in project development and knowledge sharing. Lastly, the government must focus on preventing, not perpetrating, political attacks on mayors and ensuring local governments can operate without undue interference. By fostering collaboration, clarifying roles and supporting local governments, Ukraine would be able to preserve the achievements of decentralisation, enhance community resilience and maintain democratic principles amidst the ongoing war. This strategy would not only address immediate challenges but would also align with Ukraine's long-term goals of democratic development and EU integration.

Safeguarding democratic gains

While the war has challenged Ukraine's resilience, it has also underscored the importance of strong and inclusive democratic institutions. Ukraine should remain vigilant in safeguarding its democratic gains as it navigates the ongoing war. The stakes can be quite high: the resilience of local authorities, ending the loss of human talent, the inclusion of vulnerable communities and the upholding of decentralisation efforts are all important to Ukraine's journey towards EU integration. All these issues require a forward-looking approach, one that both addresses the immediate challenges as well as lays the foundation for a more inclusive and sustainable democratic future. By doing this, Ukraine can emerge not only as a nation that has proudly defended its sovereignty, but as a thriving democracy ready to take its long-deserved place in the European community.

→ Pavlo Cherchatyi is an independent analyst researching civil society engagement, democracy and governance issues in Ukraine.

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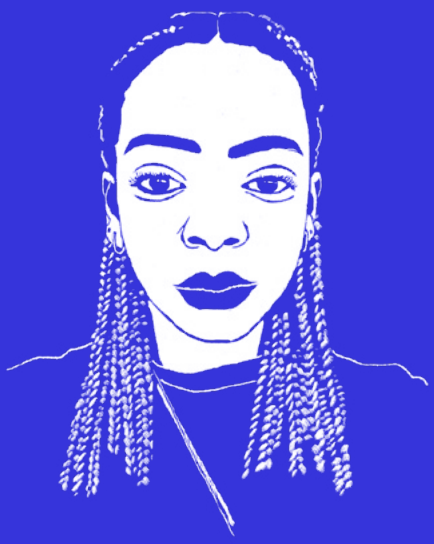
What does it take to engage successfully in politics?



"To be successful in politics, empathy is essential, because it's about doing good for society. Professional success is not the most important factor, it's the ability to make a difference and be commited. That's what truly matters."

Georgette, 18, is doing her A-levels in Hamburg this year and is in the political theatre profile at her school.

Good reads on "For a Just Democracy!"

RECOMMENDED BY BKHS STAFF

Kirsten Hartmann is a research assistant in the programme unit "European and International Politics".

FUNFACT: ... on good days, she runs as fast as she talks.

AUTHOR: Susin Nielsen
TITLE: No Fixed Address
PAGES: 288
PUBLISHED: 2018
PUBLISHER: Tundra Books

Though labelled as a children's book for ages 10 and older, people of all ages should read this novel about homelessness. It is written from the perspective of 12-year old Felix who moves into a camper van with his mum after losing their flat. The book tells the story of the "invisible homeless": people without a fixed address who live with friends, in shelters or in their cars. It shows their social and financial burdens, the practical difficulties of finding a new job or school, as well as the effects on their mental and physical well-being that come with feelings of shame and guilt.

Franziska Zollweg heads the Correspondence Project at the Helmut Schmidt Archive to archive Helmut Schmidt's private correspondence.

FUNFACT: … is a passionate photographer who enjoys archiving Helmut Schmidt's 300 photo albums.

AUTHOR: Bell Hooks
TITLE: Ain't I A Woman: Black Women And Feminism
PAGES: 205
PUBLISHED: 1982
PUBLISHER: Pluto Classics

As a supporter of Black Feminism fighting against the intersectional discrimination of women of colour, the American-born women's rights activist bell hooks provides an insightful study of how Black women's experiences are affected by racism and sexism, depicting how they were and continue to be oppressed by both white and black men as well as by white women.

Hooks impressively describes how Black women have been involved in the feminist movement against all odds and defines feminism as a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels – sex, race and class. She calls for reorganising society to give the self-development of people precedence over imperialism, economic expansion and material desires.

Uta Schlott is a project manager of think tank communication at BKHS.

FUNFACT: … especially enjoys adaptions of novels and highly recommends the film version of "The Hate U Give".

AUTHOR: Angie Thomas
TITLE: The Hate U Give
PAGES: 400
PUBLISHED: 2017
PUBLISHER: Walker Books

"The Hate U Give" follows Starr Carter, a Black teenager who witnesses the fatal shooting of her unarmed friend Khalil by a white police officer. Starr struggles with the aftermath as she navigates between her predominantly Black neighbourhood and her mostly white prep school. She grapples with fear, anger and the need for justice while facing pressure from both communities. Through activism and speaking out, Starr finds her voice and fights against racial injustice, ultimately inspiring others to do the same. The novel explores themes of racism, police brutality, identity and the power of community.

Ann-Kristin Glöckner is a project assistant for the Correspondence Project at the Helmut Schmidt Archive.

FUNFACT: … studied at the same Parisian university as Edouard Louis.

AUTHOR: Edouard Louis
TITLE: Who Killed My Father
PAGES: 96
PUBLISHED: 2019
PUBLISHER: New Directions

The title of the book is not a question. Edouard Louis argues that the French government and its oppressive politics against the poor killed his working class father by forcing him to work despite being sick. He had worked for years in a factory, where his spine was seriously injured in an accident. With this autobiographical essay, the writer and sociologist gives an insight into French society and its challenges. He narrates episodes from his father's life, impressively illustrating how class and gender, social background and images of masculinity are intertwined. The essay paints a portrait of a father from a son's perspective, and it calls for change and a rebellion against discriminatory policies.

Marieke Petersen was a student assistant at BKHS and a Master's student of Peace and Security Studies.

FUNFACT: … chooses tea over coffee. At any time.

AUTHOR: Petr Pomerantsev
TITLE: This Is Not Propaganda
PAGES: 270
PUBLISHED: 2020
PUBLISHER: Faber & Faber Limited

If "Don't trust what you see on the Internet" was a book, it would be this one. Pomerantsev shows how opinions and facts are formed and manipulated, as well as how these mechanics and agendas are hidden from view. In his book, he underlines that while fundamental rights are essential to keeping a democracy strong and functioning, freedom of speech and uncensored access to information can simultaneously be turned into its greatest liability. He illustrates this with recent examples of disinformation campaigns and informational warfare. By bringing in anecdotes from his family's history as political refugees from the USSR, he stresses the value of liberal rights and the need to protect them.

Matt Delmastro is a research assistant at BKHS.

FUNFACT: … prefers biking over public transport (except during the Berliner winter).

AUTHOR: James Baldwin
TITLE: The Fire Next Time
PAGES: 78
PUBLISHED: 1963
PUBLISHER: Penguin Classics

Made up of two essays, one a letter to his nephew and a second discussing his life growing up in Harlem, the Christian Church and the Nation of Islam movement, James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time" is a heart-wrenching, brutally honest and razor-sharp dissection of race relations in the United States written in the midst of the civil rights movement. Despite the tragic and inhumane reality of Black Americans being denied their status as full members of the nation (a concept Baldwin is quick to problematise), he nonetheless remains optimistic about the future of the US and its capacity to "achieve the impossible". Written in searing, beautiful prose, Baldwin's two essays remain landmark texts appealing for racial justice, where one's humanity, not outer appearance, determines one's worth in the community.

Miriam van der Linden is an event manager at BKHS organising all kinds of the foundation's activities.

FUNFACT: … finds the view of Mount Vesuvius on the Gulf of Naples more inspiring than the view of Hamburg Harbour on the River Elbe.

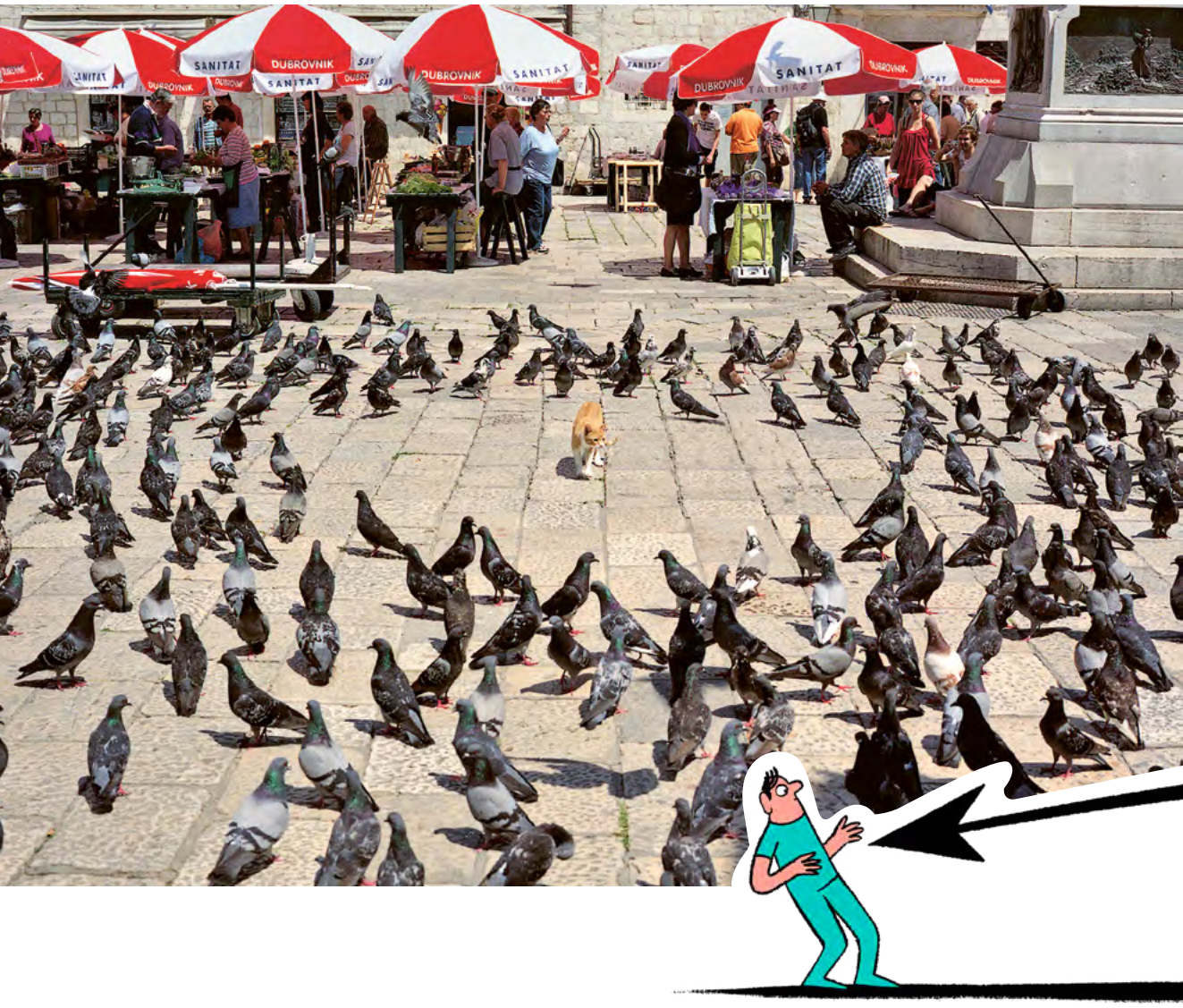
AUTHOR: Elena Ferrante
TITLE: My Brilliant Friend (orig.: L'amica geniale, 2011)
PAGES: 331
PUBLISHED: 2011
PUBLISHER: Europa Editions UK Ltd

The Neapolitan Quartet starts with the story of Elena and Lila growing up in one of Naples' poorest neighbourhoods in the 1950s. As children of the working class, their opportunities are few. Both are allowed to attend primary school, but only Elena is lucky enough to continue studying and ultimately leave their old neighbourhood behind. While Lila has to work in the family business and is forced into a web of corruption and violence, she secretly continues to educate herself. Despite all the contradictions, the two women remain connected by a strong bond. The story of Lila and Elena reminds us that equal access to education is still not a given for everyone, although educational equity is one of the most important foundations for a just democracy.

What does it take to engage successfully in politics?

"To be able to get involved in politics successfully, you need to understand politics. It is especially important not only to remain in your own 'bubble', but also to inform yourself about topics that are not part of your personal sphere. In addition, communication skills and a keen sense for issues should be present, as well as the knowledge to identify possible solutions and compromise."

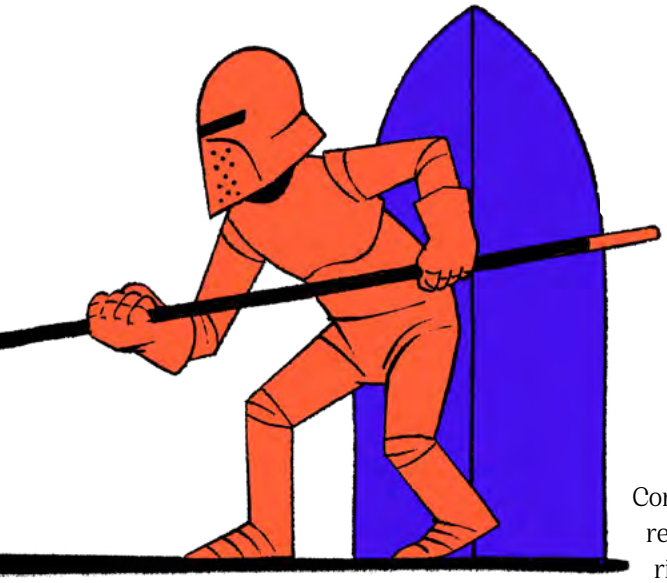
Helke, 22, will complete her Bachelor of Science in Computer Science next year.



BRINGING POLITICS BACK IN

TEXT: LEA YPI

Authoritarianism is on the rise almost everywhere. While progressives are divided and on the defensive, the new right has understood the relation between the law and politics. Amidst the crisis of liberal democracy, authoritarian figures are seeking to reinterpret the law to their advantage. To stem the authoritarian tide, progressives must connect the immaterial concept of the law to politics instead of merely reflexively defending abstract legal concepts.



Contemporary liberal democracy has been recently increasingly challenged by the rise of authoritarian figures in politics. Promising swift, decisive action in response to the many emergencies we face, this concentration of power in the hands of single political actors is fundamentally at odds with the basic principle of legitimation in democratic societies. Unlike pre-modern concepts of legitimacy which grounded political authority on religion, the divine right of kings or the force of convention, the modern idea of democracy is often seen as a collective answer to the problem of anarchy between individuals, an effort to ensure that through a system of rights and obligations the freedom of each is guaranteed in respect of the freedom of all. This distinctively modern way of reflecting on the relation between individual and collective freedom explains why authoritarianism undermines democracy, and why the challenges it poses raise distinctive questions concerning the relation between law and politics in contemporary societies.

In Franz Kafka's short story "Before the Law", a man turns up at the gates of the law. He thinks that since the law is for everyone, he has a right to gain entrance, but meets a powerful gatekeeper who tells the man he must fight him in order to get in. The man prefers not to challenge the gatekeeper. He sits patiently outside the law, spending everything he has to win him over, making polite requests to be accepted but always failing to obtain permission.

Kafka's story is a good metaphor for thinking about the relation between law and politics. The gates to the law are in theory always open. To be inside the law means to be recognised, represented and protected by the authorities that support and enforce it. Inclusion in the law, however, also requires fighting its gatekeepers, and doing so in the awareness that there are no guarantees of success. Law, in other words, depends on politics.

The right's assault on the rule of law

Historically, the progressive position before the law has taken many forms, from fighting its guardians to persuading them to compromise, to identifying with them. But regardless of the differences of strategy, there was a shared awareness among progressive political movements that gaining access to rights required an active struggle to challenge the status quo with a positive vision for social change. Democracy was not allegiance to a body of settled norms; it was the name for a process. With the help of that process, previously excluded groups of people – workers, women, people of colour – became subjects with rights. There was little inherently desirable or despicable about the rule of law, it was all down to who the laws represented, and how.

The struggle is not over, but progressives are in retreat. In the ongoing crisis of liberal democracy, only the new right seems to understand the relation between law and politics, often interpreting it in sinister ways. The right, ever more coherent in its ideology and disciplined in its organisation, is increasingly willing to challenge the guardians of the law through a relentless assault on the institutions on which the law relies to be enforced: the courts, the civil service, the press, established norms of international cooperation. In 2020, several judges of the Hungarian Constitutional Court resigned citing executive interference in the court's operations and the erosion of judicial independence through the appointment of loyalist officials. In January 2021, Donald Trump's efforts to challenge the results of the 2020 election by pressuring Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger led to direct pressure to "find 11,780 votes" and overturn the election outcome. Consider also the tirades of then Attorney General Suella Braverman against the Human Rights Act, and her remarks about taking power back from the courts in the United Kingdom during her term of appointment. Or the recent steps taken by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to initiate constitutional reform that would combine elements from a presidential and parliamentary system to consolidate executive overreach.

All around the world, from Italy to Hungary, from India to the US, the right's assault on the rule of law, the related undermining of civil servants, judges and civil society activists, its censoring of the press, are all part of a campaign of a progressive assertion of the executive over all other branches of the state. Its ultimate aim is to turn the law into an instrument of right-wing politics, to disempower those who would still see it as a vehicle of social emancipation. What seemed a few years ago like isolated cases of attack on minority rights, as with Viktor Orban's campaign to restrict NGOs' ability to assist with asylum claims or the ongoing segregation of Roma people, are now going mainstream. Think about the exponential rise in the assassinations of black people, indigenous leaders and environmental activists in the months following the election of Jair Bolsonaro as Brazil's president. Or the brutal violence to which members of Muslim communities have been subjected in India, following Modi's divisive amendments of citizenship laws.

Progressive failings

The novelty of the reorganised right's assault on legality is that it has a semblance of legitimacy: far right parties are becoming mainstream helped by the votes of the people, and claiming to speak with their voice. As capitalism and democracy continue to come apart, the radical right continues to set the agenda, making its traditional ideology once more attractive to the very subjects it leaves behind, turning ethno-nationalism into the seemingly obvious response to the miscarriages of globalisation.

In contrast, progressives are failing. They are failing because the left in most advanced liberal democracies has either forgotten or failed to communicate the lessons that the new right has learned from it: it has abandoned the critique of the current system, the language of dispossession, the need for political education to advance democratic ideals. It has also abandoned all efforts at international coordination with regard to strategy, means and goals. It has turned liberal parliamentary democracy into an end in itself whilst losing all nuance of what the state is for, and why we need the law.

This is not surprising. Many progressive movements are plural and divided, not just on who to fight, but also over what, and how. In the face of these divisions, it is natural to find common ground in the protection from assault of existing laws and institutions. It is even more understandable when one has helped to shape these institutions, attempting to make them more inclusive over the decades. It is easier to celebrate individual paladins of the law than to create the collective political force required to challenge the crises we face.

An appeal for more politics

The right has managed to both reappropriate the left's tradition, and renew itself by displacing its own crumbling centre. Reluctant to do the same, the alternatives struggle to emerge. They struggle because we have now divorced politics from law. Our analysis of the state is increasingly reduced to strategic thinking about how to win elections, our understanding of politics is equated to exporting manuals for good governance around the world and our commitment to the rule of law is presented as a self-evident moral claim. But righteous outrage is no substitute for political action. If people think all politicians are corrupt, they are not going to miss them. If laws are widely seen as a tool in the hands of self-serving elites, nobody is going to feel sorry when judges are called traitors, or sympathise with bullied civil servants. The assault on legality will continue to have legitimacy.

For a just democracy to prevail against the tendencies towards authoritarianism, we must not passively defend the rule of law, but actively change how we do politics. The challenge lies in connecting the law – an abstract, seemingly eternal body of rules – to the realm of politics, to show which rules are worth changing and which are worth fighting for.

By the end of Kafka's story, the man who seeks entrance to the law has become a friend of the gatekeeper. As his death nears, he wonders what would have happened if he had tried to fight. When he is on his last breath, the guardian leaves and the gates of the law are permanently shut. Will those angered by the prevailing of authoritarian norms manage to escape that fate? There is hope, but only.

→ Lea Ypi is Professor at the London School of Economics and Adjunct Associate Professor Philosophy at the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University.

One wish for the future

TEXT: ALISA RIETH

People love stories. And people need stories with which to identify individually, but also as part of society. In our current era of polycrisis, crumbling trust in democratic institutions and the rise of the far right, democracy needs to tell better stories – stories that illustrate the benefits of living together in freedom, under democratic rule and in a society that celebrates diversity and community. I wish for a politics that tells stories resonating with people's concerns and offering clear options for change. I wish for a society that overcomes divisions and discovers new ways of developing shared visions for our common future.

I wish for a democratic campfire.

→ Alisa Rieth is knowledge transfer officer "Peace and Security" at BKHS and project manager of "Unlock Europe – The escape game on peace and security in Europe"; a joint project by BKHS and the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg.

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WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE NOTIFIED ABOUT THE PUBLICATION OF FUTURE ISSUES OF THE BKHS MAGAZINE? →

The fourth issue of the BKHS Magazine collects tangible ideas "For a Just Democracy!" The goal is to identify the success factors necessary to reinstate a just and resilient democracy. To pursue this goal, we invitited a diverse group of people to contribute with their expertise and experience – from academia, policy circles and the media to activism and the arts. By bringing together various perspectives and approaches, the BKHS Magazine aims to present ways to overcome the challenges to and revive just democracies that have come under pressure from social inequalities, political polarisation, disinformation and climate change.

The Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung commemorates one of the most important 20th-century German statesmen. As a future-oriented think tank, it addresses issues that also interested Schmidt. Three overarching programmes are at the heart of the foundation's work programme: 1) European and International Politics, 2) Global Markets and Social Justice and 3) Democracy and Society.

Closely meshed with these programmes, the permanent exhibition "Schmidt! Living democracy" in Hamburg's city centre reflects almost half a century of German and international contemporary history. It places the achievements of its namesake in current and historical context. In the Helmut Schmidt-Archiv in Hamburg's Langenhorn neighbourhood, the foundation makes the private documents of Schmidt and his wife Loki available to researchers and grants the public access to the Schmidts' former private home.

The foundation was established in 2017 by the German Bundestag as one of seven non-partisan foundations commemorating politicians. It is supported by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media.

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