

# ATHENS DEMOCRACY FORUM

International experts debate the most urgent issues of the day



VALÉRY HACHE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

## Where is global politics headed?

ATHENS

### Democracy, A.I. and the Middle East: All are in play in a year of elections

BY FARAH NAYERI

Jordan Bardella, the 29-year-old far-right leader who nearly became France's prime minister last summer, warned last week that his country's existence was imperiled by Muslim migrants who shared the same militant Islamist ideology as the Hamas-led assailants who committed deadly attacks in Israel on Oct. 7, 2023.

"We have this Islamist ideology that is appearing in France," he said. "The people behind it want to impose on French society something that is totally alien to our country, to our values."

"I do not want my country to disappear," he said. "I want France to be proud of itself."

The politician — whose party, the National Rally, finished first in the initial round of parliamentary elections in June, before being defeated by a broad multiparty coalition in the second and final round — spoke in an onstage conversation at the Athens Democracy Forum, an annual gathering of policymakers, business leaders, academics and activists organized in association with The New York Times.

The defeat of Mr. Bardella and his party by a broad anti-far-right coalition were a sign of the endurance of liberal democratic values in the West. Yet his rapid rise as a political figure in France also comes as a warning that the basic tenets of liberal democracy are constantly being tested — and like never before in the postwar period.

The year 2024 has been the year of elections: More of them were held than

nology being used to manipulate the election's outcome, and of the merits of the respective candidates: the former president Donald J. Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris.

"I am among a large part of the American electorate who feels very unhappy about the choices in front of us," said Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University in New York, in an interview after his Athens panel discussion. "The American political system, in my view, is broken. It's dominated by very big money. It's dominated by very superficial messaging, and it is not leading to the kind of serious analysis and public participation that we need."

On the foreign policy front, and in international conflict zones, "we are not listening. We have a completely one-sided set of actions and public narratives, and it's extremely dangerous," Dr. Sachs said. Neither candidate is "stating positions that are going to solve America's problems," or is "likely to lead to the kind of diplomacy that we really need in this world."

Other conference participants emphasized the ripple effects that the U.S. election would have on the entire world. "Voting for the U.S. president is something that matters to all," said Maria Elena Agüero, secretary general of the Club de Madrid, a forum of former leaders of democratic countries that promotes democracy.

So far, she said, the United States has been viewed as a country supporting the democratization process around the world, and if Ms. Harris wins, people expect "continuity in many of the policies, especially in terms of foreign policy." But a Trump win will "add to that sense of confrontation that the world is really not in the mood to continue, or to take up again."

She noted that besides the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East there were more than 50 cross-border armed conflicts underway in some 90 countries. These conflicts, combined with the "very disruptive autocratic forces" in various parts of the world, were leading to an "erosion of democracy."

Technology is another weapon contributing to the erosion of democracy.

In January, an artificially generated robocall from a voice that sounded like President Biden's urged voters in New Hampshire not to cast their ballots in that state's primary. In September 2023, the voice of a top candidate in the parliamentary elections in Slovakia was faked (using A.I.) in audio recordings where he appeared to say how he was planning to rig the vote and raise the cost of beer.

The world's tech giants have pledged to fight the spread of these types of deep fakes, and to ensure that elections are held in a safe and secure information environment. Microsoft does that through a division called Democracy Forward. Its general manager, Ginny Badanes, spoke on a panel in Athens and began by underlining the "opportunities for humanity" that A.I. brought — from boosting basic productivity to resolving major health issues such as cancer diagnosis.

She also acknowledged that, "as with any technology that's ever been introduced, there are people who are going to look at that tool and say: 'How do I make this a weapon?'"

She recalled there were widespread fears that A.I. would "drastically impact" voting this year, and so far, it had turned out to be "the dog that hasn't barked."

Another panelist, Carlos Luca de Tena Piera, executive director of the center for the governance of change at IE Uni-

versity in Spain, agreed. Citing information from the Alan Turing Institute in Britain, he said that of 112 national elections held since January 2023, only 19 showed signs of A.I. interference.

But another speaker maintained the sense of alarm. "I actually think the dog is barking and barking quite loudly, but maybe not in the ways we think," said Vivian Schiller, vice president and execu-

tive director of Aspen Digital at the Aspen Institute.

She said the big problem was that A.I. had enabled a candidate or party's adversaries to "move with a speed and scale that was not possible four years ago."

She said the Russia-based Internet Research Agency — which has been accused of interference in the 2016 U.S.

presidential elections — had "thousands of people working there, creating personas, sending out tweets across social media." Today, "you don't need that: the A.I. enables false information at a speed and scale that is unprecedented."

"Whether it's having an influence and will change the vote, we don't know, but this is real," added Ms. Schiller, a former *POLITICS*, PAGE 58

**Ballot measures**  
Voters in France, above, and 20 other countries cast their ballots in the European Parliament election in June. Far-right parties saw gains, but more centrist candidates won the majority.

**The problem with technology is "that our data is stolen, that copyrights are violated, that privacy is violated" and "there isn't much choice about it."**

ever before in history. Some four billion people — more than half of humankind — have been, or will be, called to the ballot box in dozens of elections around the world. They include the 161 million U.S. voters heading to the polls on Nov. 5.

Elections are the unquestionable cornerstone of democracy: the process by which voters choose the leaders and lawmakers who will rule over them. Voters' ability to make an informed choice rests on their access to accurate and verified news and information about the candidates and their parties.

Speakers and panelists at the three-day conference discussed how technology has provided faster, wider and easier access to information. Yet it has also given them ready access to misinformation and disinformation: fake news, deep fakes and manipulated data, which are competing with journalism for voters' attention. Artificial intelligence is also harvesting their personal and institutional data and violating their privacy. If these factors are not regulated and controlled, democracy is under threat.

The role of technology in democracy was one of the key topics of debate at the Athens forum, as were the situation in the Middle East — more specifically, the serious repercussions of the Oct. 7 attacks — and the U.S. election. On and off-stage, panelists spoke of the risk of tech-

 Microsoft

“  
When your technology changes the world, you bear a responsibility to address the world you’ve helped create.”

Brad Smith, Vice Chair and President, Microsoft

At Microsoft, we believe in the transformative power of AI to drive positive social change and help fulfill our mission of empowering every person and organization on the planet to achieve more. But we need strong protections to prevent its harmful misuse and exploitation. In this historic election year, we're committed to creating safeguards against deceptive AI practices and will continue partnering with communities, governments, and industries to protect the integrity and longevity of our democracies.

Learn what we are doing to advance and protect democracy.  
[aka.ms/DemocracyForward](https://aka.ms/DemocracyForward)





## ATHENS DEMOCRACY FORUM

## Democracy at the world's ballot boxes

As voters cope with strain and stress, is there still room for optimism?

**Moderator:** Steven Erlanger, diplomatic correspondent, *The New York Times*

**Participants:** Yamini Aiyar, visiting senior fellow at the Saxena Center for Contemporary South Asia at Brown University and former president and chief executive of the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi; Yves Leterme, former prime minister of Belgium and member of the Club de Madrid forum; Oliver Röpké, president of the European Economic and Social Committee of the European Union; and Lwando Xaso, a lawyer, author and founder of Including Society

Excerpts from the panel *State of Democracy — Assessing the Mega Election Year* have been edited and condensed.

**STEVEN ERLANGER** Supposedly more than 40 percent of the world heads toward the polls this year, seven of the 10 most populous countries. But what is the state of democracy? We have challenges to democracy both within consolidated democracies in the West and other places like India, but also challenges from all kinds of strains and stresses.

First we have Yamini Aiyar, who ran the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi and has just come to Brown University. Tell us about Indian democracy and South Asian democracy and its challenges.

**YAMINI AIYAR** I come from a region that in many ways tells us a story of the vulnerabilities of democracy but also gives us a little bit of hope, I think, of the resilience of democracy when citizens take control. Our democratic institutions are fledgling; they are vulnerable to creeping authoritarianism, which is very much the context in which Indians voted in April, May and June this year against a backdrop of strongman leadership.

The political party that was running the government, the B.J.P. [Bharatiya Janata Party], and our prime minister,



JOAO SILVA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

[Narendra] Modi, were extremely popular and set a goal for achieving 400 seats, essentially total dominance, in the lower house in our Parliament. And on the eve of the elections the chief opposition party, the Congress Party, said its accounts were frozen. A couple of senior politicians who were leading subnational governments were thrown into jail. It did look like this was an election that was to be won before it even took place.

**ERLANGER** Would you say that's the reason Modi didn't do as well as expected?

**AIYAR** Oh, absolutely. Even though the B.J.P. and Prime Minister Modi have proved their resilience — he is back in power — the realities of what authoritarianism can do to our everyday lives and democracy was on voters' minds.

**ERLANGER** In Europe we've seen something sort of similar, for example, in Poland, right? We've seen a Law and Justice party that maybe pushed things a bit too far and was set back. But we also see other things happening in Europe that make some people question whether democracy is working as well as it should.

**YVES LETERME** I think democracy is still very much in demand, which I think should be a very positive element. The

problem is that when people ask for electoral democracy, liberal democracy, apparently there's a frustration with the offer formulated by political parties and by institutions.

Political parties have been traditionally organized as providers not only of candidates, but also of thoughts, ideology of programs; they haven't really integrated this new way of opinion-making and of debates that are more horizontal. The liberal democracies have I think benefited from the fact that traditional parties have been hiding away too long from really naming the problems.

Representative democracy is facing a crisis in all its parts, but on the other hand, things can be addressed.

**ERLANGER** In some places like Hungary, like Slovakia, as in a way with India, you have democracies that are being kind of centralized from within, sometimes with popular support.

**OLIVER RÖPKÉ** One of the reasons that we said before, for the crisis of democracy, is that people are not interested. It's not true. In Austria and Germany in recent elections, the voter participation increased massively, but right-wing parties benefited from it.

As a trade unionist, I'm convinced that social security and social justice is a

good instrument and it's somehow a guarantee against this. But it's not completely true because we see that also, in countries where we don't have a particular severe economic or social situation, the far right is on the rise. So there are other reasons. It's true, migration is one of them. And we should say that democracy is not only about the process; it's also about the results.

But if you talk about the process, I think this is absolutely a precondition that we have democracy also between the elections, and that we have a vibrant civil society, strong social partners, and I would really make a strong plea for strong institutions.

**ERLANGER** Lwando Xaso is a constitutional lawyer from South Africa. Talk to us about the transition in South Africa — where it's going well, where it's going off the rails, and what lessons do we have?

**LWANDO XASO** My pursuing constitutional law is a direct result of coming of age in the '90s and witnessing this incredible period in our history — the first president I can remember is Nelson Mandela. How do you create one nation out of the fragments of the past and create one law to address what happened in the past? So 2024 is a moment of truth for South Africa in the sense that it is the 30th anniversary of our democracy.

A metaphor that we use a lot is the idea that a Constitution like ours is meant to serve as a bridge. It is meant to take our nation from the past to the future. What I've come to realize is we've had a revolution in South Africa. If "revolution" means changing regimes, we've had that. Transformation is something different from a revolution. Transformation requires a change of heart.

**ERLANGER** One of the obvious challenges to democracy comes from, if you like, the more authoritarian world, the Russia-China notion. How do you see it?

**AIYAR** One of the reasons why India went down the path that it did in 2014 [the year Modi was first elected prime minister] was because there was a general sense that we could do with a little bit less democracy, we'll take that risk, if we get a lot of economic development.

The biggest protests we've had in In-

dia in the last five years have been actively nonparty political. They've gone to the streets in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka. So there is also the first emergence of populism of this kind that we've seen in the last decade, decade-plus that has challenged democracy using democratic institutions to challenge elite plutocracies that had dominated democracy.

We're seeing a new kind of mobilization that is challenging the fundamental — or questioning the fundamental institutions of democracy itself — and it's time for political parties, and our politicians, and society as a whole, to have that conversation.

**ERLANGER** Is there a European answer to this argument?

**LETERME** I think we're still in the situation where populations increasingly question the system. People have over the last couple of decades have increasingly been under the impression that the core task of public authority is to protect people — physical security, security about their own future.

**ERLANGER** When I was covering the German elections, one of the things people who voted for far-right parties said to me was "You know, the people in Berlin, they think it's their job to save the world. We worry about ourselves."

**RÖPKÉ** Democracy is not only about the process or the values — you should really see that these people that you mention, they want to see results. I think the perception is that other systems can deliver without our values. They have the impression that we talk about our values, but not about really what matters for these people.

And I think the second point is polarization and disinformation. Recently we've been to Brazil; we've seen that Lula [President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva] has re-established the structures that were totally dismantled by his predecessor. And now they are struggling with a few people who really think with powerful social media they can undermine the judicial system. We are not here yet in Europe, but I think it goes step by step in this direction. And we have to defend our institutions and our democracy.

**At the polls**  
Voting in Soweto during South Africa's general election in May. During a panel discussion at the Athens Democracy forum, Lwando Xaso, a South African constitutional lawyer, called 2024 "a moment of truth" for the country's democracy, which is now 30 years old.



A magazine whose goal is not to "keep up" but to slow down, and to think.

noemamag.com



THE  
**DEMOCRACY  
& CULTURE**  
FOUNDATION

The Democracy & Culture Foundation was founded in 2019. The Foundation's mission is to help democracy evolve by empowering society through citizen engagement and better governance. We aim to become the leading global platform for dialogue and solution-oriented activities concerning the evolution of democracy and culture. Two of our major events, the Athens Democracy Forum in association with The New York Times and Art for Tomorrow, are held annually and designed to convene, connect and foster collaboration between prominent and emerging voices for both democracy and culture. The Foundation and its partners also run worldwide initiatives including Teens for Democracy, Reimagining the Building Blocks of Democracy, the Climate Change Hub, the Kofi Annan NextGen Democracy Prize, as well as exploring the use of A.I. in deliberative democracy tools.

**OUR MISSION** Bridging democracy and culture, the Foundation aims to become the global platform for dialogue and solution-oriented activities concerning:

The evolution of democracy, civil society and the media.

The role of culture in enabling democracy to flourish.

At the core of the Foundation's mission lies the link between democracy and culture, where culture can be a means to highlight issues, and expand citizens' awareness and engagement. We explore and create the spaces where culture and democracy meet.

**OUR COMMITMENT** **THINK** To actively support the search and articulation of new ideas and concepts that are more responsive to 21st-century democratic challenges and foster a wider understanding of the relationship between culture and democracy, focusing on identifying innovative and pragmatic solutions that contribute to democracy's resilience and evolution.

**TALK** To engage in constructive dialogue in order to disseminate these ideas through all possible enabling channels by engaging with the most suitable partners and by proposing concrete policy-oriented solutions.

**DO** To organize conceptually original and practically critical activities related to the promotion of democracy and culture, combining expert-led and citizen-driven policy recommendations and innovative approaches to policy implementation.

The Foundation implements the **THINK – TALK – DO** approach by working with a wide range of partners focusing on policy work, citizen participation initiatives, education and the development of the next generation of democratic leaders.

✕ DemCultureFnd  
 @ democracyculturefoundation  
 in The Democracy & Culture Foundation

democracyculturefoundation.org  
 athensdemocracy.org  
 artfortomorrow.org



# Seeking the road to Middle East peace

Fears of a wider conflict continue to grow as violence intensifies

BY CELESTINE BOHLEN

As the war in the Middle East faced another round of deadly escalation, the international negotiator Nomi Bar-Yaacov called on all sides in the conflict to stop and consider how “we got here.”

An Israeli citizen and associate fellow at the London-based think tank Chatham House, she didn't hesitate to give her own answer.

“At the heart of this lies the right of the Palestinians to self-determination and to statehood,” Ms. Bar-Yaacov said, leading off a sometimes-edgy 40-minute panel discussion on the Middle East at the Athens Democracy Forum last week.

In recent days, the heightened confrontation between Israel and Iran has exacerbated fears in the region and globally about an even larger and more dangerous conflict.

And yet, the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict was what started the current war, just as it has other Middle East wars before it. And most of the panelists agreed that the most feasible path to peace would be the two-state solution that has been on and off the table since Israel was created.

“Nobody in 76 years has come up with a better idea,” said Roger Cohen, Paris bureau chief of The New York Times, who has reported frequently from the region.

But how to get the warring parties to this—or any consensus—is a challenge that has become more and more daunting ever since Hamas militants crossed the border from the Gaza Strip and went on a murderous rampage in southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. That event, followed by Israel's war in Gaza, its assassination of Hezbollah and Hamas leaders and its incursion into southern Lebanon, has only deepened the suffering on both sides of the conflict.

“It is very difficult when you are dealing with two traumatized peoples com-



AMIR COHEN/REUTERS

peting over their trauma,” said Steven Erlanger, the European diplomatic correspondent at The Times, who moderated the panel.

To get on a road toward a just and lasting peace, Israeli and Palestinian societies both need to prepare their people, and change their leaders, Ms. Bar-Yaacov said.

“After the horrors and unimaginable events of Oct. 7, it is very, very difficult for Israelis to understand how a Palestinian state will make them more secure,” she said. “Because if Israel is not convinced that a Palestinian state is in Israel's national security interests, then we are going to have more and more cycles of war.”

But Ms. Bar-Yaacov also noted that neither the current government of Israel nor the current Palestinian leaders were capable of finding a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Ahmed Shihab-Eldin, a Kuwaiti American journalist of Palestinian descent, argued vehemently that the occupation and “dehumanization” of the Palestinians needed to be addressed now, before any two-state solution.

“Without accountability, peace is not possible,” he said. “Oppressed people, robbed of their human rights and dignity, will always resist. History teaches us this. The obscene impunity Israel enjoys” (he paused for applause from the audience) “makes all of us less safe.”

Mr. Shihab-Eldin argued that if Israel were to survive, it would have to change.

“The truth is Israel is not a democracy,” he said. “It has a right to exist but it does not have a right to exist the way it is existing.”

The United States, Israel's major military and strategic ally, is to blame for not doing more to control Israel both in war and in peace, and specifically for not putting a stop to Jewish settlements on the West Bank, Ms. Bar-Yaacov said.

“We need to point out that the U.S. allowed settlements to expand and vetoed numerous [United Nations] resolutions that could have built trust,” she said. “I point to the United States because I

point to states that consider themselves a role model.”

Mabel Lu Miao, secretary general of the Center for China and Globalization, noted that the powerlessness of U.N. resolutions on successive Middle East crises had undermined perceptions of democracy among many U.N. members. She proposed that China, a major trading partner for many countries in the Middle East, including Israel, could still play a role as a neutral mediator in the region.

Mr. Shihab-Eldin was more forceful in placing blame on the United States. “Let me be honest, and address the elephant in the room,” he said. “Without meaning-

**How to get the warring parties to a consensus is a challenge that has become even more daunting.**

ful pressure from the United States on Israel, it is practically impossible to imagine a conversation about a cease-fire let alone peace.”

Mr. Cohen agreed that the United States and its allies had been unable to stem the violence that has spread from Gaza to Lebanon and now to Iran.

This is because other states were powerless to contain the “reverberations of the Oct. 7 attack,” he said. “The reverberations were too strong.”

Mr. Cohen, who reported on the immediate aftermath of the Hamas rampage, said the event had reawakened “a fundamental trauma” among Israelis and Jews around the world.

“In the post-Holocaust era, Jews tried relying on the kindness of strangers,” he said. “They are not going to do it again. Six million was enough. They will fight for their survival.”

“It is very important to understand the psychology, history and the different narratives” on both sides, Ms. Bar-Yaacov said. “You need to study, and understand, and respect. Both societies are deeply traumatized, and both societies feel very insecure.”

“Israelis and Palestinians have not reached that point where they are prepared to make the difficult, painful decision” to move toward peaceful co-existence, Mr. Cohen said.

“Compromise is painful.”

Great hospitality takes off!



aegeanair.com

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 25



Athens Democracy Award

Rightfully Greek

Commemorating 50 Years Since Democracy Returned 1974-2024





# ATHENS DEMOCRACY FORUM

## In India, a ray of hope for democracy

Narendra Modi was re-elected, but his party fell short of domination

BY DAVID BELCHER

Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India was elected to a third term in office in June, but his Bharatiya Janata Party failed to win a simple majority in the lower house of Parliament, surprising political observers inside and outside the country.

With the B.J.P. winning only 240 of the 543 seats, far short of the 300 that party members had hoped for, Mr. Modi now leads a coalition government.

India and the Allure of Modi, a panel discussion at the Athens Democracy Forum on Oct. 3, addressed this issue, focusing on the appeal — and the shifting role — of this galvanizing figure and the future of Hindu nationalism that had cemented much of his power.

Ahead of the Democracy conference, the two panelists, Yamini Aiyar and Maya Tudor, were interviewed by video for their take on Mr. Modi's future and what it portends for the world's largest democracy and for other democracies facing elections. Ms. Aiyar is a visiting senior fellow at the Saxena Center for Contemporary South Asia at Brown University and Ms. Tudor is the professor of politics and public policy at the Blavatnik School of Government, and a fellow at St. Hilda's College, both at Oxford University.

The interviews were edited and condensed.

**What is the allure of Narendra Modi, and how has it evolved?**

**MAYA TUDOR** Modi came to power in 2014 on the heels of several corruption scandals that had marred the previous governments. He was able to nationalize a strategy he had really honed in the state of Gujarat when he was the chief minister, which was to polarize in places where doing so reaped political dividends.

There is some indication that Modi's

promise of delivery has not been realized. India is growing, but at the same time prices are rising. And I think we saw there were lots of voters in that district who said that, yes, we have a new expensive Hindu temple, but prices are still rising. We still don't have a great deal of jobs. And bread and butter concerns will trump all of that with time. And that's what we saw in the most recent election, that some of that allure, some of that golden sheen, has begun to dull a bit.

**YAMINI AIYAR** Modi is, as all successful politicians are, an extremely charismatic leader — positioning himself as a grass-roots leader, someone from a relatively deprived caste community and presenting himself as an alternative to the elite. The second aspect of his appeal has a lot to do with how he also positioned himself as a strongman leader, but a kind of aspirational oriented strongman leader. Modi very effectively deployed a language of opportunity, of aspirations, of looking to the future, which is very different for Indian politics. Modi is an extremely clever politician. And while he has picked up from the populist playbook from across the world in terms of how he deals with dissent, how he deals with political opposition, he has also been very effective in deploying the cult of his personality and seeking legitimization with voters.

One of the tools he uses for a country like India at our stage of development has been welfare politics and welfare schemes. He's very effectively used technology to build welfare schemes through what we call in India direct benefit transfers, which are effectively cash transfers. And what he's been able to do is to use that as a way of building a direct, emotive connection with voters.

**Is there a sense that India's democracy, since Modi didn't do a power grab, has a bit of hope?**

**TUDOR** Absolutely there is. I think there's a big sense in India that something has changed. I wrote an article in the Journal of Democracy titled "Why India's Democracy Is Dying" and I asked if this can be reversed. And yes, it can be. The key to reversing it will be a



IDREES MOHAMMED/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

political party that develops genuine grass-roots reach that is not the B.J.P. because you need an organization that can mount a systematic challenge to the B.J.P. And for many years, it looked like that simply didn't exist in India.

It's also worth stepping back and thinking about what is happening to global democracy and how India epitomizes that. Elections are just one pillar of democracy, and that's a really important point because the way that democracy is dying around the globe today is not through tanks rolling in the streets and military generals grabbing governments, or through leaders who come to power and cancel elections. Democracy doesn't die with a bang right now. It's eroding quietly and slowly.

But the real ray of hope in India is that it has not come to the point where there

is a supermajority in Parliament, which, of course, the Modi government was actively pursuing and which would have allowed it to change the Constitution. I think that many people are breathing a real sigh of relief and feel that Indian democracy is in safer territory.

**Tell me more about that sigh of relief.**

**TUDOR** Society's ability to ask probing questions — to raise them and to debate them — that kind of deliberation, as well as the kind of rights and forums and political opposition that enables those questions, is the lifeblood of democracy. Note these rights matter principally when individuals oppose the existing government, because if you're simply in favor of what the government is doing, then your rights are typically protected.

It's when you are dissenting that the right to speech and assembly really needs to be protected. The partially realized hope is that these rights are once again more protected — both because the coalition constrains the government, but so too do other parties and other state institutions who are starting to timidly reassert a little bit of independence.

**Is Modi respecting the process of democracy?**

**AIYAR** Yes he is, but it is more complex than that. The election campaign did not start on a level playing field. In March, every legitimate and not-so-legitimate step was taken to ensure total dominance. And that included freezing accounts of the [Indian] National Congress party and putting senior opposition political leaders in jail. Criminal cases were brought against opposition politicians, curbing dissent of independent voices, as well as complete and total control of mainstream media. All of these were elements of why several of us have argued that democracy was backsliding.

**How was this election different for India?**

**AIYAR** I think a really important element of this election was the role of social media. When there was total control of mainstream media, it was social media that pried open spaces for those who were looking for alternative voices. And that played a role in building the narrative that supported an alternative idea or at least reminded voters of some of the challenges of excessive dominance of a single authoritarian — or close to — an authoritarian party.

A politician in India once said to a colleague of mine, "I don't really worry about inequality. I worry about poverty alleviation. I want all boats to be lifted." Sure, all capitalism will raise all boats, but if you don't put checks and balances on its more pernicious aspects, the vast gap between the boats of those that were already rising and the boats of those that are risen have serious implications for the kind of society we are building and the kind of politics that it then enables.

**Galvanizing figure** Supporters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi celebrated after India's election in June. His Bharatiya Janata Party failed to win a simple majority in the lower house of Parliament, and Mr. Modi now leads a coalition government.



## Democratic Odyssey

Nestled on a hillside overlooking the Acropolis is the PNYX, an archaeological site often disregarded by tourists and locals alike as a mere mound of dusty rocks. In fact, it holds profound historic significance. This is the spot where the *Ecclesia*, an assembly of citizens of ancient Athens, met to make decisions about their city's governance between the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. Every year, five hundred citizens were chosen by lottery to deliberate on Athens's domestic issues, and the city's place in the world. Random selection, sortition, played a central role in this striking form of democracy which renewed itself for over two centuries.

This might seem like a quaint historical anecdote, but we, the co-conveners of a new citizens' initiative, the Democratic Odyssey, maintain believe notion is directly relevant to our own age. In times of rising authoritarianism, civil division, the trampling of women's rights, and the disappearance of trust among citizens and politicians, randomly selected assemblies can help us find new solutions. As part of a large crew of actors dedicated to the vision, we launched this endeavour inspired, in part, by the ancient Greek model, but also, more immediately, by the EU's 2021 Conference on the Future of Europe and subsequent Citizens' Panels, which have utilized sortition as part of a collaborative approach to policy-making. Energized by these efforts, the Odyssey team aims to build a broad campaign to push the EU to go further and institutionalize a permanent citizens' standing assembly that would help set agenda, contribute to policy recommendations and perhaps most importantly scrutinise and monitor EU institutions.

Last Sunday, on 29 September, we were present at the PNYX as the Democratic Odyssey gathered 200 randomly selected citizens to discuss their personal experiences of crisis over the last 15 years. Unlike the ancient Athenian assembly which was confined to elite men of the city, this meeting was transnational and radically inclusive. Members included people from all walks of life, from 29 European countries as well as migrants and ref-

ugees from non-European countries. There were 16 to 80 year olds from cities and rural areas and all types of education, occupation or life landscapes were represented. Thanks to in-person and AI translation, the assembly members were able to communicate across linguistic boundaries and began to discuss a number of topics, from the eurocrisis, to crises of migration, to COVID and of course to the wars at our borders. By the end of the meeting, members were already proposing ideas as to what the EU could do to be better prepared for future crises and what role citizen participation could play in that process.

The PNYX meeting was an inspiring encounter in its own right, but it was only the beginning of a journey that we hope will last for many years. In the coming months the Odyssey will convene four further meetings across Europe, in person and online, that will bring assembly members into national parliaments or other spaces, from Florence to Vienna to Warsaw. The team is seeking to develop "translocal" impact, by planting different kinds of democratic seeds as they travel the continent. The City of Athens has already committed to exploring options to create neighbourhood participatory councils and a youth council, both of which would feed into the Odyssey's European journey. And as the Assembly moves, it also aims to bring in more diverse actors to demonstrate to national politicians, MEPs and the Commission that there is indeed a strong public appetite, across borders, for such a future institution.

This is not a utopian exercise but a realistic strategy for delivering real democratic change. Our world seems bleak these days as we learn again the meaning of war on our continent and in our neighbourhood. But, as the Odyssey has already begun to demonstrate, there is hope in the prospect of citizens' empowerment—which, as we build political support, may yet help subvert autocracies from below and renew the old promise of self-government.

James Mackay and Kalypso Nicolaidis

HONORING THE SECOND COHORT OF FINALISTS OF THE

## KOFI ANNAN NEXTGEN DEMOCRACY PRIZE

**Anton Eremin**  
RUSSIA  
Peace and Human Rights Activist

**Shila Batta**  
NEPAL  
CoFounder and Creative Director of Freedom Studio

**Christopher Wleh Sivili**  
LIBERIA  
Activist & Community Organizer and Policy Consultant

**Luis Villatoro Villaherera**  
EL SALVADOR  
President of TRACODA

The 2024 Kofi Annan NextGen Democracy Prize is awarded to Omar van Reenen. A civil rights activist, Omar has spearheaded transformative initiatives for LGBTQI+ rights in Namibia, driving crucial policy changes and fostering acceptance, even as these rights face significant opposition. From drafting protective legislation to campaigning for abortion law reform, Omar tirelessly advocates for a more inclusive democracy.

The Democracy & Culture Foundation and the Kofi Annan Foundation launched the NextGen Democracy Prize in 2023, with an aim to recognize exceptional leadership and inspire more young people to commit to the advancement of democracy.

The winner receives an award of US\$ 10,000 and a one-year mentorship with a recognized democracy expert. Each year, the winner has the opportunity to speak at the upcoming Athens Democracy Forum and officially pass the award to the next recipient.

We would like to congratulate and thank all nominees and finalists. It is heartwarming to see so many incredible and powerful initiatives led by amazing young leaders throughout the world.

**Margo Vorykhava**  
BELARUS  
Advisor on Youth Policy

**Omar van Reenen**  
NAMIBIA  
Civil Rights Activist and CoFounder of Equal Namibia

**Nisreen Abdelrahman Hassan Elsaïm**  
SUDAN  
Founder of Bridge to Humanity

**Archana Vijai Kumar**  
MALAYSIA  
Fellow at Equality NC and Member of Parliament Digital

For more information, please visit [democracyculturefoundation.org](https://democracyculturefoundation.org)

✉ @ForumAthens | @athensdemocracyforum | in Athens Democracy Forum | #athensdemocracy



# ATHENS DEMOCRACY FORUM

## An African activist holds onto her ‘why’

Namatai Kwekweza speaks out about her arrest in Zimbabwe

BY GINANNE BROWNELL

A year ago, during the 2023 Democracy Forum in Athens, Namatai Kwekweza was awarded the Kofi Annan NextGen Democracy prize for her pro-democracy and feminist advocacy in Africa. Last week, as the forum again met in Greece, Ms. Kwekweza was dealing with repercussions of that activism: her recent arrest in Zimbabwe and pending trial.

**Commitment**

Namatai Kwekweza at the Athens Democracy Forum last year. Ms. Kwekweza, founder and director of WELEAD Trust, was held for 35 days after being taken off a plane in Harare, Zimbabwe. She said, “I just told myself: ‘You know what? The day will come. I am not going to die here.’”



ATHENS DEMOCRACY FORUM

On July 31, Ms. Kwekweza, who is the founder and director of Zimbabwe’s youth leadership development and advocacy organization WELEAD Trust, boarded a domestic flight from Harare, the capital, to the city of Victoria Falls to attend a conference on philanthropy.

While on the tarmac with the engines running, Ms. Kwekweza, 25, along with Robson Chere and Samuel Gwenzi — activists who were also traveling to the conference — was escorted off the plane. The three were then forced to enter a domestic arrivals terminal, which was under renovation, through the luggage carousel hole, with Ms. Kwekweza being kicked through it after her initial refusal. They were beaten and tortured for several hours, she said, before finally being taken to a police station and charged with disorderly conduct on allegations that they had protested outside a court in June over the arrests of six dozen supporters of the opposition leader Jameson Timba.

In a statement issued by the United Nations, independent human rights experts expressed concern over the arrests and detention of Ms. Kwekweza, Mr. Chere and Mr. Gwenzi: “The enforced disappearance, incommunicado detention and torture, followed by the arbitrary detention of these human rights defenders is inexcusable, and not only violates international human rights law but also makes a mockery of the safeguards contained in Zimbabwe’s own Constitution.”

Ms. Kwekweza, who was held for 35

days before being released on bail, was in South Africa when those protests were taking place in Harare. In a court hearing on Sept. 30, her trial was postponed until Oct. 22. In a video interview before the hearing, she spoke about her arrest and what she believed was the real reason behind her incarceration. The following conversation has been edited and condensed.

**What happened when you were taken off the plane?**

Immediately I started asking a lot of questions, like, “Why are we being asked to leave? Who are you? You didn’t identify yourselves — what is the purpose of all of this?” As soon as I got outside, there was a man who tried to grab my phone. So instantly I knew something was really off. I started texting my mom and texting some lawyers that “I think we’re being arrested at the airport.”

**Once you were forced to go through the baggage carousel hole, what happened?**

I was wearing my Apple watch, and I could see the lawyer was calling so I

knew that someone knew that we had been taken. We were separated and I was taken into a poorly lit room. There were about seven men, and they kept asking me profiling questions like where I lived, what was my name, where was I traveling to. They gave me my phone, saying, “You have to open it,” and I told them: “First of all, you don’t have a warrant of seizure. And then second you can’t force me to open my phone, because I have a right to my own privacy.”

When I said that, one of the men said I talked too much, and he started shoving his foot straight into my mouth. He then faced his colleagues saying, “Oh, when we’re done with her, she will definitely open that phone.”

Eventually I was taken out of the room and Mr. Chere was brought in. About 10 minutes later I could hear him screaming and a violent howl, and there were thuds.

**You must have been frightened.**

I went to the bathroom and the pregnant woman [who had escorted me off the plane] said, “I’ve just been sent here to

make sure when you leave this place, you don’t end up saying ‘These men touched me inappropriately or they raped me.’ I’m just here to make sure that none of that happens.” And I was like, “But why would you be telling me that? Like, is it a possibility that this could be a thing?”

They brought me back into the interrogation room, and I saw Mr. Chere on the floor. He told me later they beat him with a metal bar, and they poured water on him. And he said, “It felt like I was drowning.” I actually was very scared, because I genuinely believed that they had killed him. They poured water on me as well.

**Did you have any idea what this was all about?**

They kept asking me “Are you guys planning demonstrations ahead of the S.A.D.C. [Southern African Development Community] summit?” And they kept accusing us of wanting to humiliate [our] president [Emmerson Mnangagwa], of humiliating the country.

The police eventually came, took us to the station and finally told us that we had been arrested for disorderly conduct. I had already suspected it was about the S.A.D.C. summit, because [Mr. Mnangagwa] was next in line to become S.A.D.C. chairperson [in Harare in August].

I think that they felt that people are disgruntled in Zimbabwe with a lot of the things that have been happening. So it’s not like what happened to me was very isolated. It was just part of a very large nationwide crackdown that was happening to a lot more other people across the country.

**You were then transferred to Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison and initially denied bail. Were you worried that the charges would stick?**

I was in South Africa when the protests happened, so it’s impossible that I could have committed a crime because I was out of the country. But they had taken my passport. I think they did not expect a situation where I would have such a strong alibi. It became a problem for them.

My lawyers [later] applied for bail at

the High Court and it was granted. It is still at a very intimate, intricate legal phase, where we’re just trying to be very strategic and calculative, so that we get what we need [passenger manifests to prove her whereabouts during the protests].

**What was the situation in prison?**

When I got there, there were already 29 other women who were political prisoners, and those women were so good to me. They took care of me. And when I began to hear these stories, they are the main active political opposition, and they were beaten up so badly. Some of them had broken hands, broken limbs, busted eardrums. I was with them for 35 days.

I think that the prison experience in itself was very humbling because it helped me to see life in a very different way. When we were told our bail was denied, that was the heaviest night of my life in prison. I just covered myself with my blankets, and I just cried. But then after that, I just told myself: “You know what? The day will come. I am not going to die here.” And it taught me to have this outlook on life that we must be positive, and we must have hope that the day will always come. It’s a lie that all political prisoners have been released.

**Despite everything that happened to you, I assume that it will not stop you from being a voice for change?**

Once you are labeled by the government that you are a threat to them and that whatever you’re doing does not serve them, I think it’s for a lifetime. So for me it’s always reverting back to my “why” — “Why do you want to do this? Is it really worth it?” And my “why” is basically this idea of advancing human potential through leadership development and advocacy for human rights.

When I think of every time that we work with young people and they feel empowered, or every time that we advocate for something in Parliament and it’s passed through, and I see genuinely how that’s making people’s lives better, I’m like what happened to us can never compare to the reward that we will get if we continue to persevere and if we have a deep conviction in the “why.”



AE Anthony E. Comminos foundation  
www.comminosfoundation.com

**Advertorial**

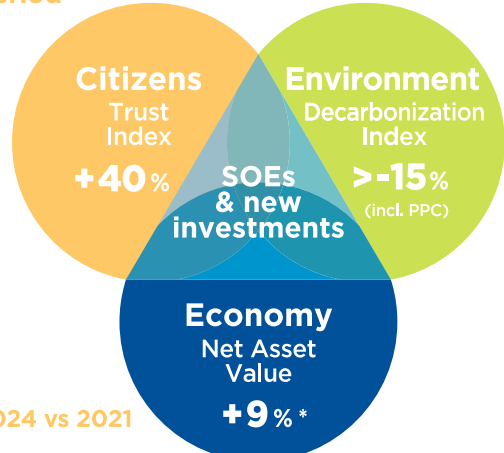
### Growthfund's Trust Index: Reinventing Trust in State-Owned Assets

In today’s global landscape, trust in public institutions is under intense scrutiny. This challenge is not confined to Greece - it spans industries, sectors, and borders. Citizens are understandably skeptical, having seen institutions fall short time and again. Yet trust is not built in times of triumph; it is forged in moments of adversity, when transparency, accountability, and decisive action must take precedence, no matter the circumstances.

As Greece embarks on a new chapter of economic progress, Growthfund, the National Fund of Greece, is advancing toward its transformation into the nation’s Sovereign Wealth Fund. While remaining a trusted asset manager, it has adopted a forward-looking approach with its portfolio subsidiaries, undertaking a significant initiative: quantifying, measuring and nurturing trust within its ecosystem - a pioneering step in how Greece governs its state-owned assets.

Aligned with its 2022-2024 Strategic Plan, Growthfund has carefully chosen its beneficiaries: citizens, the environment, and the economy. To ensure accountability, it has established group-wide KPIs covering both financial and non-financial metrics, dedicating one of the mega KPIs to trust, the **Trust Index**; to measure the value of trust the Greek citizens display in Growthfund’s mission.

**Growthfund's mega KPIs for the three-year period**



**2024 vs 2021**

\*Excluding the effect of the water companies and non-recurring (exceptional) events.

The Trust Index, a dedicated tool designed to annually measure and enhance trust in Growthfund and its network of State-Owned Enterprises, reflects a broader mission:

- To ensure a meaningful contribution to Greece's progress.
- To rebuild public trust in Growthfund and its ecosystem.



Our 2023 findings revealed that people are ready to trust again when transparency and accountability are demonstrated. That is the impact Growthfund strives to have - not just as a Sovereign Wealth Fund, but as a force for good in society.

As Growthfund steadily transitions to its enhanced role as a Sovereign Wealth Fund, its mission evolves beyond asset management. It now enters a new phase, becoming a catalyst for sustainable development, national progress and strategic investments that will shape and fuel Greece’s future. At the heart of this transition remains an unwavering commitment to trust and integrity, marking a significant paradigm shift in the governance of state-owned assets.

**“For Growthfund, trust is about responsibility. By strengthening trust, we enhance stability, foster cohesion and drive progress.”**

Gregory D. Dimitriadis, CEO & Executive Member of the Board of Growthfund, the National Fund of Greece



**A few words about Growthfund**

Established in 2016, Growthfund is Greece’s National Investment Fund, with the Greek State being its Sole Shareholder, represented by the Minister of National Economy & Finance. Tasked with maximizing the value of public assets, Growthfund is committed to a balanced approach that prioritizes economic growth alongside societal and environmental responsibility.

With 25,000 employees, it manages a €5.5 billion portfolio, including 16 subsidiaries and participations, as well as concession rights in 23 regional airports in Greece.

As of August 2024, under a new law by the Ministry of Finance, Growthfund’s role will expand, with governance reforms and the creation of a new Investment Fund as its new subsidiary to fuel domestic investments.

<https://growthfund.gr/en/>



# ATHENS DEMOCRACY FORUM

## ‘Now is the time to be bold and disruptive’

Persiana Aksentieva



Hamburg, Germany; 28; Youth fellow, International Youth Think Tank

Born in Sofia, Bulgaria, Ms. Aksentieva has spent the last five years advocating democracy in Europe. An International Youth Think Tank fellow, she recently traveled to Sofia and spoke to high school students about the importance of voting. She also works for a beauty and personal care company in Hamburg.

Nicole Kleeb



Berlin; 27; Project manager, Bertelsmann Stiftung

Ms. Kleeb works for Bertelsmann Stiftung, a social reform foundation, in Gütersloh, Germany, as well as in youth engagement in democracy throughout Europe. She also leads the foundation's #NowEurope initiative that encourages young people to vote and volunteers as vice president for the Young German Council on Foreign Relations.

Lauren Perl



Boston; 21; Co-founder, BallotWise

A senior at Harvard majoring in history and literature, Ms. Perl is the co-founder, with Logan Delavan-Hoover, of BallotWise, a voting education site. She also co-founded and was a co-director of the Equal Rights Amendment Centennial Convention in Seneca Falls, N.Y., in July 2023, which honored women and queer people who have fought for equal rights over the last century.

Bia Turnbull



Cape Town; 26; Youth fellow, International Youth Think Tank

As an International Youth Think Tank fellow, Ms. Turnbull promotes youth empowerment and democracy. She also works as an intelligence analyst for React, a Dutch nonprofit, and volunteers for nonprofits that support democracy and equal rights, especially in postcolonial countries.

Omar van Reenen



Windhoek, Namibia; 28; Founder, Equal Namibia

Mr. Reenen is the 2024 winner of the Kofi Annan NextGen Democracy Prize, awarded to those from 18 to 30 who are outstanding leaders in the democracy movement, for their work helping youths counter homophobia and discrimination in Namibia. Their work was a driving force in Namibia's 2023 Supreme Court decision to recognize same-sex marriages carried out abroad. In addition, they lead L.G.B.T.Q. initiatives throughout Africa.

Luis V. Villaherrera



San Salvador; 29; Co-founder and President, TRACODA

TRACODA — transparency, social control and open data — creates programs and technological tools for Salvadorans to fight corruption and promote democracy. Through initiatives like democracy boot camps, Mr. Villaherrera has spurred thousands of young people into action. He was recognized as an Obama Foundation scholar and was a finalist for the 2024 Kofi Annan NextGen Democracy Prize.

BY SHIVANI VORA

Young people from around the world who actively champion democracy are an integral part of the global effort to gain, preserve and protect freedoms. The following six were among the group of young activists who attended and participated in the Athens Democracy Forum last week. Before the forum began, we interviewed them by phone, video and email about their work and experiences. Their responses were edited and condensed.

**What was the impetus for you getting involved in this line of advocacy?**

**LAUREN PERL** When I was 14, I signed up to participate in a civic training program run by my congressman. The program taught youth how to lobby, canvass and phone bank so that students could effectively engage with the legislative and electoral systems. This experience started my fascination with the political system and my commitment to democratic processes.

**BIA TURNBULL** My journey began with my family's history of sacrifice and resilience under apartheid. Their relentless belief in democracy, even after the repression of apartheid they faced, drives my passion.

**OMAR VAN REENEN** For queer youth like myself, defending democracy is not a choice but a necessity. In Namibia,

my generation born at the advent of independence is called the “born-free” generation. But what is the point of being “born free” when apartheid-era laws are used to criminalize our right to love equally? That is why I see the fight for L.G.B.T.Q.I.+ equality as the civil rights issue of my generation, just like racial justice was the civil rights issue of our parents' generation.

**LUIS V. VILLAHERRERA** For most of my childhood, I lived a dual reality in a small town in El Salvador. I wasn't exposed to the public health care system or the deficiencies of the public sector until I went to college, where I witnessed people dying without access to a room or medicine in hospitals. At the same time, I saw politicians becoming millionaires with the people's money. Seeing the inequalities in the system ignited a fire in me.

**What have you learned — positive or negative — from other youths you encounter in your work?**

**PERSIANA AKSENTIEVA** I've learned that young people are incredibly resourceful, not only in accessing information but also in critically analyzing it before forming opinions or supporting causes. However, many feel frustrated by systems that seem outdated or indifferent to their input, which creates a gap between their energy for change and the opportunities available to enact it.

**NICOLE KLEEB** That “we are not alone” — both in a good and negative way. Voluntary work is frustrating, and sometimes you would like to give up. And you're not alone in these thoughts. After the European elections, I heard similar things from many youth organi-



At the polls Sorting ballots in Germany in June. “Fifty votes have decided whether a candidate enters Parliament or not,” said Nicole Kleeb, of the importance of voting.

zations: “Why did we try so hard if this is what the election results look like?” But the positive aspect, the very good turnout, was often ignored. It is crucial not to forget this success and celebrate what has been achieved.

**PERL** Because of BallotWise, I now know that youth activism does not exclusively manifest as direct legislative advocacy, electoral organizing and political demonstrations. Effective organizing is about changing the minds of decision makers and community members alike. To do that, we must focus on fostering civic discourse about the issues plaguing our community.

**TURNBULL** One of the negative things I have learned is just how much hardship youth face — the repression and violence they endure while fighting for democratization. I've encountered countless youth striving to secure their basic human rights through movements like Woman, Life, Freedom, Free Sudan, Free Palestine and more. So many have had to endure oppressive, exploitative systems, and they have been persecuted for wanting to affect positive and peaceful change.

Yet what stands out most on a positive note is the unbreakable spirit of the youth to fight for the world they envision. From movements calling for peace, cease-fires, unity, inclusivity and tolerance to climate action, nothing is going to stop us from creating the world we want to live in.

**VAN REENEN** It has been empowering to see young people collectively organize for change. As a gay African youth, the only pathway to liberation I have realized is one built on intersectional organizing. I have been inspired by the solidarity and cross-movement across gender, race, ethnicity and class.

**VILLAHERRERA** The passion of other young fighters is inspiring. It shows you that even when you feel hopeless, hope still exists.

**What has been your most compelling moment or time in your work as a democracy advocate?**

**KLEEB** The work on the European elections this year. We traveled across Germany with more than 20 youth organizations to motivate young people to vote. We set up numerous events and workshops at bars, schools, playgrounds, you name it. This energy and enthusiasm are contagious.

**TURNBULL** The International Youth Conference 2024 and Nobel Symposium in South Africa stand out. Hosting it in my home country was a profound honor. These young leaders were open, tolerant, empowering, compassionate. Their proposals on the challenges of democracy incorporated Indigenous core values such as Ubuntu, a Southern African philosophy of humanism that emphasizes communalism, mutual care, interconnectedness and shared humanity.

**VAN REENEN** In May 2023, the Supreme Court recognized same-sex marriages contracted abroad — a beacon of hope in a continent often overshadowed by regressive policies. But the backlash was swift and brutal. Homophobic rhetoric surged from members of Parliament, and attacks on queer Namibians increased. Our parliament passed an anti-L.G.B.T.Q.I.+ bill to nullify the Supreme Court verdict and went further to criminalize

allyship and imprison activists like me for six years.

A defining moment for me was when we then again won the high court challenge to decriminalize the apartheid-era sodomy law in June 2024. This was once again met with the passage of the amendment to the Marriage Act, meant to prohibit same-sex marriage.

But I continue to fight, and our next frontier is at the ballot box. It's gratifying to see that Namibian youth comprised 65 percent of newly registered voters in August and plan to head to the polls this November to save our democracy from state-sanctioned homophobia.

**VILLAHERRERA** When I met President Obama. During our meeting, I broke protocol and said, “I'm sitting here, and I know this is a unique opportunity, so I need to ask uncomfortable questions. If I don't, I'll be letting down the people who cannot ask for themselves.” The room went silent — people were shocked but intrigued. After I asked my questions on how to fight wannabe dictators, President Obama offered this advice: “You have a heat in you — use it, and don't be afraid to act.”

**What are some of the misconceptions you have heard regarding democracy? And which one irritates you the most?**

**AKSENTIEVA** That democracy is a universal, “one-size-fits-all” system. In reality, democracy must be flexible and responsive, adapting to the distinct cultural, political and social needs of each country.

**KLEEB** “Nobody cares about me” and “my vote makes no difference” — these statements make me really angry because they show what a miserable job is being done in promoting politics and enthusiasm for democracy. When you look at individual constituencies in Germany, you can see that in some cases, 50 votes have decided whether a candidate enters Parliament or not.

**PERL** It frustrates me that people think the actions of the president and senators are light years more important than what is happening in their state house or at their school board meetings. With this in mind, I am very proud that BallotWise shows the legislative record of political candidates from state houses to the White House.

**From your perspective, where in the world is democracy most threatened?**

**AKSENTIEVA** Democracy is at risk wherever authoritarianism goes unchecked, regardless of whether it's in emerging democracies or well-established ones. Polarization and disinformation are increasingly global challenges, weakening democratic institutions across regions.

**KLEEB** Democracy is most threatened where we take it for granted — in North America and Europe. Generations have grown up in democracy and we are not aware enough of the gradual emergence of antidemocratic forces in our country.

**TURNBULL** I would say that democracy is increasingly under threat in the West. Recent trends reveal rising social and political repression in countries like the U.S., the U.K. and Germany, evident in increased hate crimes — including Islamophobic, antisemitic and racist incidents — and gross mistreatment of migrants.

**VAN REENEN** Democracy is under siege across the world, but look no further to the strength of a nation's democracy than to how it treats its most vulnerable. In Namibia, the L.G.B.T.Q.I.+ community has become the litmus test to the promise of equality our nation was founded on.

**If there is one change you would like to see in approaches or in the exercise of democracy, what would it be?**

**AKSENTIEVA** I'd like to see a shift toward more participatory democracy, where citizens are continuously engaged in decision-making processes rather than limited to periodic elections.

**KLEEB** Talking with people does not mean talking to them. People are more honest, express their ideas and thoughts and challenge each other when they are taken seriously and discussed at eye level, like we accomplished with our project #NowEurope for the European election in Germany.

**PERL** Accessible local news sources centering on local politics are essential for strengthening democratic engagement, promoting transparency and countering misinformation. By helping citizens stay informed about the issues closest to their daily lives, these outlets empower people to participate more fully in democracy and ensure that local governments are accountable and responsive to their communities.

**TURNBULL** I believe that democracy is not a one-size-fits-all model. While there are core characteristics that define democratic systems, their application should vary to reflect the diverse needs and contexts of different societies.

**VAN REENEN** Democracy only works if we all collectively protect it. It will become less of an illusion if the stewards of democracy, the people, ensure with our votes that we place politicians in power who are serving the core tenets of it.

**VILLAHERRERA** Don't be boring. We can't keep doing the same projects and expect different outcomes. Now is the time to be bold and disruptive.

**ATHENS DEMOCRACY FORUM**  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH *The New York Times*

**Thank you**

The Athens Democracy Forum would like to thank all speakers, delegates, sponsors and partners for their contribution in making this year's event such a success.

We look forward to seeing you at next year's ADF early October.

In Cooperation With: Kofi Annan Foundation, City of Athens

Organized By: The Democracy & Culture Foundation

Headline Sponsor: Microsoft, Google

Silver Sponsors: Libra Philanthropies, CDI Climate Democracy Initiative, ASU Arizona State University, Global Challenges Foundation, GREEK NATIONAL TOURISM ORGANISATION

Bronze Sponsors: COSMOTEC, NATIONAL BANK OF GREECE, ATHENS

Supporters: Democratic Odyssey, apolitical foundation, etc.

Official Air Carrier Sponsor: AEGEAN

Official Hotel Partner: HOTEL GRAND BETHANSA

Content Partners: Robert Bosch Stiftung, REPRESENT WOMEN, FORUM ON INFORMATION & DEMOCRACY, PAPASTRATOS, SOLIDARITY NOW, ORACLE

Knowledge Partner: Berggruen Institute

Event Management Partner: SGT

Education Partners: KATHIMERINI, la Repubblica, POLITICO, GULO NEWS, CNN



Driving force Omar van Reenen accepted the 2024 Kofi Annan NextGen Democracy Prize at the Athens Democracy Forum on Oct. 3.



# Rethinking journalism

As social media rules the day, what should traditional media do?

**Moderator:** Pamela Paul, columnist, *The New York Times*

**Participants:** Persiana Aksentieva, youth fellow, *International Youth Think Tank*; Dr. Battinto L. Batts Jr., dean, *Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Arizona State University*; Stephen Dunbar-Johnson, president, *International, The New York Times Company*; Camille Grenier, executive director, *Forum on Information and Democracy*

Excerpts from the panel *Rethinking Journalism: A Crisis of Confidence* have been edited and condensed.

**PAMELA PAUL** We are at very fraught times for journalism. People don't believe journalists, and they don't want to pay for journalism. So with that, I just ask each of you: How do you see the future of journalism given those enormous and perhaps insurmountable threats to its existence?

**DR. BATTINTO L. BATTS JR.** Despite the dramatic change that's happened in the industry from an economic standpoint, I remain very positive and bullish on the future of journalism. We still need it very much in our communities. From a global perspective, it's very much a part of a healthy democracy. And I'm encouraged by the students who I get to interact with on a day-to-day basis at the Cronkite School.

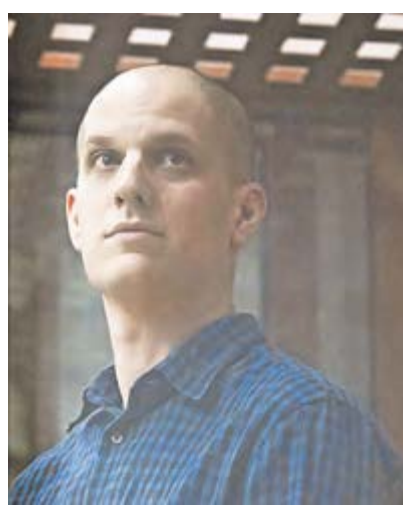
**PAUL** All right, Persiana, perhaps you can talk about the future and what you see as an aspiring journalist.

**PERSIANA AKSENTIEVA** I'm representing the International Youth Think Tank as a youth fellow, so I'm very happy to bring this young perspective to this important discussion today because I think it's not a surprise for everyone sitting in this room that young people distrust media. There are many reasons for that. There is, for example, fake news, and misinformation that let young people avoid media. But what we have to do as International Youth Think Tank members is dive deeper into understanding a bit more, what makes us distrust the media?

At the International Youth Conference in South Africa people discussed the factors that make us distrust media. And one of the things they identified is that media is lacking diversity. Not only diversity in terms of representation of sexual differences, racial, gender, disability, and so on, but really also diversity in terms of content, in terms of representing different perspectives and different views. And another challenge is also the ownership, because young people are saying if there are several very, very strong entities that control most of

## Dangerous jobs

Evan Gershkovich, an American reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* who was accused by Russia of espionage, inside a glass defendants' cage before a hearing in June in Yekaterinburg. He was released on Aug. 1 as part of a prisoner exchange.



NATALIA KOLESNIKOVA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

the media, how are we actually getting the unbiased picture?

It's also not a surprise that a lot of young people are turning to social media nowadays. They're getting their news there, their information there. However, that also poses a lot of risks. Because the algorithms on social media create so-called echo chambers, filter bubbles that really influence the way that we see things, and the political beliefs that we have.

And therefore, today I have two proposals. That I would also like to give to you. The first proposal was actually developed at this International Youth Conference in South Africa, where people have [built] this idea of creating a global media guild that controls and regulates the media in terms of diversity to track how diverse different media outlets are but also track the ownership. Because we do believe that we need to implement very strict caps on ownership so that there are no few entities that hold very big market share. And it's therefore very important that we prevent monopolies.

The second proposal that I have is [protecting] the political and the journalistic community. We think that the journalists are the key actors in sustaining democracy, but they can only do so if we support them. So what we propose is that we engage the United Nations, that we create a global agency that really tackles journalistic community. And I know that you might say, "Oh,



AHMED GABER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

that's such a, you know, idealistic, far-fetched proposal," but hear me out. The United Nations is investing so much into peacekeeping. — why don't we do that for truthkeeping as well?

**PAUL** So in terms of protecting journalists obviously there were maybe a few bright spots this year — the return of Evan Gershkovich of *The Wall Street Journal* from imprisonment in Russia — but for the most part it's been a very grim year with a huge number of journalists killed while reporting. Camille, do you want to talk a little bit about those challenges?

**CAMILLE GRENIER** Yes. We see that the space where journalists can do their work really freely with no pressure is not increasing, it's rather shrinking throughout the world. But I just wanted to get back to your question on what is the future of journalism. The social function is to provide facts, and I'm not sure if it's truth. I would say facts rather than truth. We've seen how truth can be different from one place to another.

But bringing facts and context, and letting people decide enlightened by these facts and context. To preserve this social function a few years ago, in 2021, we launched one of our landmark reports calling for a new deal for journalism, where we need all stakeholders and all of those who can support the sustainability of journalism, and the ideal of journalism, to take action.

We have basically three buckets of action. The first is, we need to ensure that journalists are able to do their work freely, independently, pluralistically in a way. The second is around public intervention, and we need better, stronger, future-proof policies to ensure the financial sustainability of journalism. And the last bucket is making sure that we have an enabling environment for journalism and news media to innovate, to create value and to be sustainable.

**STEPHEN DUNBAR-JOHNSON** If you really want to understand what's happening on a national scale you have to understand what's happening on a local scale. And right now there are no journalists going into town halls, procurement meetings. No one's holding people to account, which is not healthy for democracy. So if we believe that journalism is a core ingredient for a functioning healthy democracy, we need to think about new models that will support that journalism.

**PAUL** The issue of trust I think is tied into the question of "What is journalism?" Right? Because if you're talking about young people getting their news on social media there's no way to verify the source, whether it's just someone randomly tweeting something, whether it's someone in Russia pretending to be — posting something as someone else, whether it's an institution with any kind of standards.

And even within journalism there is a lot of debate about "What is journalism? Why should we trust it?" And you have a confusion as to "What is opinion journalism? What is news journalism? What is advocacy journalism" or "activism" rather than "journalism?"

Part of what *The New York Times* has tried to do is to educate people about just what our process is, and what "conflicts of interest" mean, and what it means to be "fact-checked." I don't know if those values are understood by most young media consumers, and whether that's important to them.

**AKSENTIEVA** Yeah, that's a very interesting issue, and I've already mentioned

this in different conversations before, that you mostly trust people that look similar to you, right? So that's why young people relate more to, for example, social-media content creators. They'd rather turn to this side of the story because they use more accessible language; they understand everything that is being somehow transmitted to them. Which is also not correct, because

as you said there are algorithms that influence all of this. There are missing sources.

There is a lot of misinformation going around, but people choose to still believe in that. And that's why I think that this education in that matter is very, very important to find a middle ground on how to create an article, for example, that is widely understood by everyone, that really

portrays plausible information that people can trust.

I don't think that the media, the way that it is right now, if it doesn't evolve and doesn't match the new trends and the newer requirements of young people, will get to them. So I think it's work on both sides to find this middle ground for everyone to be on the same page in the end.

## Shrinking

Piles of newspapers in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan aren't as big as they once were as even major newspapers see declines.



# ATHENS DEMOCRACY FORUM

## Using money to fight for democracy

Philanthropies can help counter a rise in autocracies, experts said

BY CELESTINE BOHLEN

With general elections in the United States less than a month away, anxiety about the state of democracy is running high around the world. And not surprisingly, so is the money flowing into philanthropic organizations that seek to help democracy thrive, or at least survive the coming political storms.

According to a report by the Democracy Fund, a nonprofit independent organization, philanthropic funding in support of democracy increased between 42 percent and 61 percent over four years, to almost \$7 billion in 2021 and 2022.

"Billions and billions" are coming in ahead of the Nov. 5 election between former president Donald J. Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris in the United States alone, said Emily Thielmann, vice president of Third Plateau and deputy director of Democracy Funders Network, both based in the United States. She was speaking on a panel, Rethinking Philanthropy: Can Money Save Democracy?, at the Athens Democracy Forum, in association with The New York Times.

"The stakes are very high in the United States and we need all the resources we can have on the table, not just so that we have the kind of robust, thriving liberal democracy that we want in 50 or 100 years, but, frankly, that we make sure we have one in two years," said Ms. Thielmann, whose network represents 600 nonpartisan funders who contribute to a range of programs to support democracy.

Members of the panel agreed that support for improving electoral practices and protecting voters' rights in the remaining free democracies was ever more vital.

According to the 2024 Democracy Report issued by the Swedish-based V-Dem Institute, 71 percent of the world's population — 5.7 billion people — live in

autocracies, a 48 percent increase from 10 years ago.

"Democracy across the world is in decline," the report concluded. It specifically cited the erosion of free speech. "Freedom of expression remains the worst affected component of democracy and is worsening in 35 countries in 2023," the report said.

At the same time, a "market failure" prompted by the rise of the internet has resulted in a corresponding decline in independent and public interest media across the world, said Nishant Lalwani, chief executive of the International Fund for Public Interest Media.

"If you look at the overall situation with journalism and democracy, we are pretty screwed," said Mr. Lalwani, noting that autocracies like Russia and China are stepping up efforts to control media and fund propaganda, dwarfing efforts to save independent journalism.

"Unless we have collective action, there is no way we can make a dent in this," he added, noting that China has spent about \$7 billion in the last 10 years to buy media outlets outside its borders.

Mr. Lalwani cited a recent report that found that the 38 countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development spent only \$500 million a year in support of independent public interest media, which was one-third of Russia's annual propaganda budget.

"Autocracies have realized that media is a cheap asset when it comes to controlling political influence, and that's because media is not highly valued, and because there isn't enough independent money to support journalism," he said.

As newspapers shrink and disappear around the world, battered by an onslaught of social media and free online content, governments and private philanthropy need to recognize that journalism needs help, Mr. Lalwani said. "Journalism is not getting enough recognition as a public good," he said. "If we want that public good to survive, we need to invest a lot more money."

The shrinking of civic space, which has exposed citizens in autocratic countries to arbitrary abuse, is also a phenomenon in the United States, Ms. Thielmann said. "We are paying a lot of attention to how we can make sure that peo-



THE DEMOCRACY & CULTURE FOUNDATION

ple are able to be safe and effective, safe from physical and cyberthreats," she said. "We are starting to see the closing of civic space in the United States, and it could get a lot of worse."

The rise of online abuse, hate speech and outright disinformation is largely attributed to the unfettered power of tech platforms, Mr. Lalwani said.

"We have outsourced the rules of public debate and electioneering to tech platforms," he said. "Now the European Union and regulators are waking up to this." He said philanthropy could help governments regulate these platforms and develop rules for algorithmic transparency and ways to counter hate speech.

Civic society has been late in recognizing how tech platforms have had "a massive impact on debate in the public square and closing civic space," he said. "We have to ensure that that changes if we are going to reopen that space."

Ms. Thielmann stressed the importance of avoiding partisan politics when

setting goals for the promotion of democracy.

"We really strive to disentangle preferred policy and political outcomes from democracy, because a lot of pro-democracy space lives on the left, and these things often get conflated," she said. "The term democracy has become very political and contentious, and we need to build a broad ideological coalition."

Stefanos Oikonomou, founder of Emergent Suns, which pulls together individual and institutional funding for new initiatives in Europe, noted that philanthropic giving in Europe tended to stay away from the electoral process precisely to avoid the risk of being labeled partisan. European philanthropic organizations, which are less prevalent and developed than their counterparts in the United States, are even more leery of political connections, he said.

"In Europe, there is a strong understanding of what is public, and what is private," he said. There is a consensus

that philanthropy "should not be about individual actors deciding and having so much power."

According to Ms. Thielmann, studies have shown that American donors are more drawn to programs promoting social justice and less to supporting the institutional efforts that are more popular in Europe.

Meanwhile, many experiments with new voting practices — like ranked choice voting, which allows voters to list their preferences on their ballot — are being tried out on the state level in the United States. "Because we have 50 states, we have 50 mini-working laboratories," she said.

Mr. Oikonomou said philanthropic organizations should not rely on just money, but should use all the levers at their disposal to protect democracy from the increase in inequality.

"Democracy is eroding and the world is on fire," he said. "If there are some people who are not feeling these flames, it is because privilege protects them."

**Fund-raisers**

From left, participants in a panel discussion about philanthropy at the Athens Democracy Forum: the moderator, Jyoti Thottam of The New York Times; Nishant Lalwani of the International Fund for Public Interest Media; Stefanos Oikonomou of Emergent Suns; and Emily Thielmann of Third Plateau and Democracy Funders Network.

Libra Philanthropies

More than a Decade of Fostering Hope and Opportunity

25M+ Lives | 183+ Countries | 326+ Organizations

libraphilanthropies.org

## Where is politics headed?

POLITICS, FROM PAGE S1 executive at The New York Times.

The damages of artificial intelligence outside the election realm were also discussed at the conference.

Peter G. Kirchschläger, a professor of ethics at the University of Lucerne and at ETH Zurich in Switzerland, said the problem with technology was "that our data is stolen, that copyrights are violated, that privacy is violated," and that "there isn't so much choice" about it.

He said that a U.S.-registered company freely operated "an app which is sexualizing pictures of children" — taking pre-existing photographs of children from the internet and eroticizing them using AI — and facing no legal consequences. By contrast, he said, "if I park my bicycle at the train station in Lucerne in an incorrect way, I immediately get a fine."

There were serious ethical problems around A.I. which had to be addressed "firmly and with urgency," he said. He suggested the creation of an institution that would regulate artificial intelligence and guarantee that, from the moment of A.I.'s creation and for as long as it operated, it respected human rights and the rights of children.

One of the big questions that emerged during the conference was: How did the world's population end up so exposed to big tech?

Explanations were provided by Meredith Whittaker, the president of Signal, the private digital communications platform — a nonprofit that she said cost \$50 million a year to operate.

Ms. Whittaker, who worked at Google for more than a decade, explained that in the 1990s, President Bill Clinton's administration was looking to get the country out of stagflation and revive the economy after the collapse of manufacturing. The internet (which, until 1992, had been a research and academic infrastructure) was identified as the solution, and, according to Ms. Whittaker, was described by many people at the time as "the New Deal without the socialism."

A regulatory framework was set up for the commercial internet, she added, and two "original sins" were committed.

First, "they put no guard rails on corporate surveillance, no privacy restrictions at all," Ms. Whittaker recalled. "If you were a company running an internet business, you could collect, create, make up, store all the data you wanted forever — much more than the government was permitted to collect and store and access."

Second, "they endorsed advertising as the business model of the internet," she said. Given that "know your customer" is the basis for all advertising, and that more and more data is needed to know the customer better, the result is a business model whereby "everyone participating in computational technology wants to collect that data."



PAUL BARRERA/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Today, she noted, five companies have "access to our lives, institutions, confidential information," and three companies, all in the United States, control almost 70 percent of the cloud infrastructure globally.

Building powerful independent alternatives to these technology platforms is absolutely crucial — but it is also extremely expensive, said Ms. Whittaker. The enduring myth of "two men in a garage that somehow turned an idea into magical technological ubiquity" is incredibly misleading: Hundreds of billions of dollars in capital expenditures are required to create and run tech platforms.

What is also necessary is "real privacy regulation," she added. "This is a national security concern at this point."

One of the other side effects of the internet's rise has been the diminishing faith in mainstream journalism, especially among new generations.

"Young people distrust the media," said Persiana Aksentieva, an Athens speaker and a youth fellow at the International Youth Think Tank, a global network of young democracy advocates.

Why? Because of a lack of diversity in the perspectives and views represented, she explained, and because of the ownership structure of media outlets. "If there are several very strong entities, for example, that control most of the media, how are we actually getting the unbiased picture?" she asked.

Battisto L. Batts Jr., dean of the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism at Arizona State University, sounded a much more optimistic note.

"Despite the dramatic changes that have happened in the industry from an economic standpoint, I remain very positive and bullish on the future of journalism," he said. "We still need it very much," and "it's very much a part of a healthy democracy."

"We will look back on this period as a period of transition for this discipline," he said. "This is not the end."

**Fake news**

Panelists at the Athens Democracy Forum debated whether artificial intelligence would have a significant impact on elections and whether that effect was already being felt.