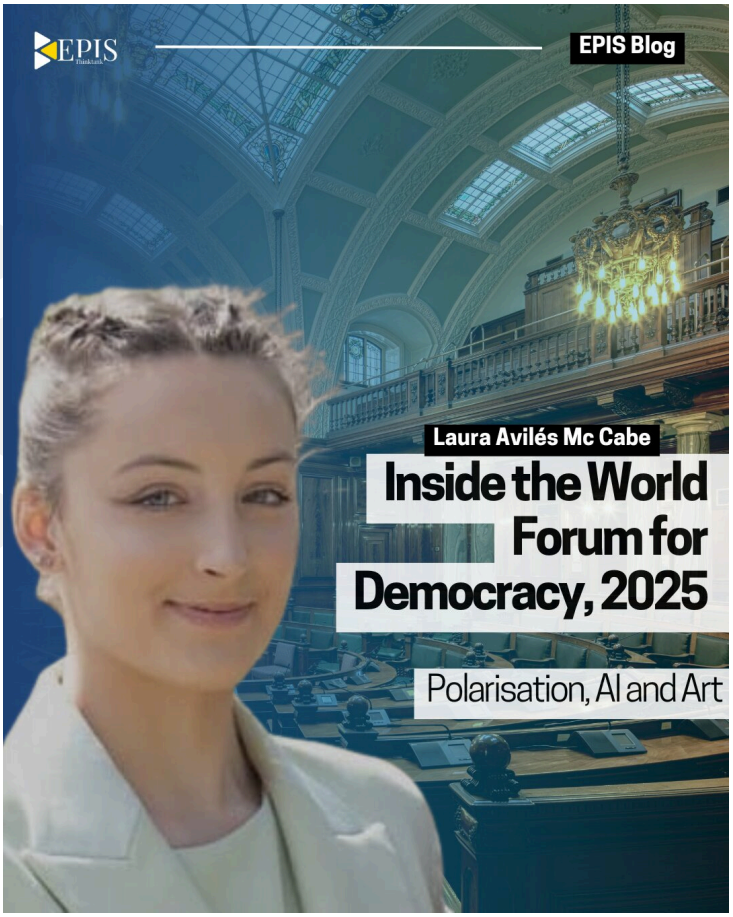
Inside the World Forum for Democracy, 2025

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This year's *World Forum For Democracy* was celebrated at the Council of Europe from November fifth to the seventh. Having attended as an EPIS delegate, I had the opportunity to meet and exchange with individuals of many different backgrounds and age groups. Amongst these attendees were European Youth, activists, and policymakers from all over the world.

Challenges facing democracy

The Forum revolved around conferences and panel discussions that mainly focused on the current challenges and threats to global democracies.

Among the most pressing issues identified were the rise in political polarisation, populism, and authoritarian practices, which undermine democratic values worldwide.

As many expert panelists highlighted, polarisation feeds off of misinformation and disinformation – phenomena increasingly amplified by digital media. Traditional media is losing ground to social media platforms like TikTok or Instagram, which now serve as primary sources of information, especially amongst younger generations. It is through those platforms that disinformation reaches the public and polarises the population, which can erode trust in political systems and liberal institutions.

Despite the gravity of these discussions, the Forum maintained an atmosphere of cautious optimism. Solutions to these problems were explored, including the responsible use of Artificial Intelligence. As Mario Hernandez, Chair of the Council of Europe's Committee on Artificial Intelligence, reminds us, "AI can be used to strengthen, weaken, or eliminate your democratic participation". It is a tool, it is neither good nor bad for democracy, however – its use is not always harmless. Therefore, creating and enforcing a legal framework which would punish its misuse is important in preserving democratic values. During this discussion, encouraging examples were shared, such as Christina Helf's parlament.fyi, a platform which employs AI to summarize and clarify Austrian parliamentary debates. This website is an example of how AI can be used to bring political debate closer to citizens in facilitating active engagement.

Another key theme was the role of history in shaping democratic identities. The Forum emphasised the fact that societies who aim to learn from their history must first confront it in all its complexity, even if that means acknowledging its different narratives. Growth happens through conversation and understanding, rather than avoiding or aiming to change the narratives we disagree with. This is especially crucial in societies where diverging historical narratives are a source of political tension. Dialogue and understanding are the foundations for reducing polarisation and fostering reconciliation.

Art, Engagement, and the Future

The transformative power of art and free expression was also celebrated throughout the Forum as an essential force in driving conversation and provoking political thought. It was also celebrated for its ability to unify through diversity and times of struggle. The performance of *Gogol Bordello*, a band inspired by Romani and Ukrainian music mixed with punk, electrified the hemicycle. The band's energy turned a hall full of strangers into a spontaneous dance floor, where people started to chat and become friends. The band's lead singer, Eugene Hutz, shared his experience of emigrating from Soviet Ukraine, where American punk rock was once banned. His story – one of resilience, creativity and identity – reflected the broader struggle for

freedom and expression that remains central to democracy. As the band 's violinist Serguéi Raibtsev put it, "Gogol Bordello is about overcoming".

I personally got to talk with Eugene after the band's performance, and he continued to share his story first hand – one that speaks of Ukrainian resistance and the nation's strive for freedom. He reminded me that democracy should never be taken for granted, and its spirit should be fought for every day, including through music.

Key takeaways: looking into the future

Overall, the Forum served as a reminder that while society stands at a digital crossroads, democracies must evolve to meet the resulting challenges. Traditional media must reclaim its influence by taking greater presence within online spaces, rather than leaving them to be monopolised by extremists. We can rebuild democracy starting from the spaces where its youngest citizens are most active – online. The Council of Europe's New Democratic Pact for Europe must ensure that our new digital era strengthens – rather than continuing to erode – our democratic systems.

As the Forum's discussions and performances illustrated, we cannot keep fighting unconventional threats with conventional tools. Innovation, inclusion, and critical engagement must guide the next chapter of democratic renewal.