

Athens Democracy Forum 2026

Building Order Out of Chaos

For years, journalists and scholars have been warning that liberal democracy is “under threat.” Authoritarian-minded leaders are tightening their grip in many countries, they cautioned, while basic rights like free speech and fair elections are slipping away.

Now that threat has become a reality. But democracy is not only in retreat — it is being openly contested as an ideal. The United States, once the (albeit flawed) paradigm of democracy, has rejected some of its core principles, while also abandoning its decades-long commitment to promoting democracy elsewhere. Rising autocrats are emboldened, former friends destabilized. Meanwhile, regular citizens are wooed by authoritarian alternatives that promise efficiency, stability and protection amid the turbulence. This shift has been fueled by real failures: democracies too often struggle to deliver material security, reliable services, and strategic direction. Many people are asking themselves what democracy has done for them lately — and what it could do that other systems cannot?

The Athens Democracy Forum 2026 will confront this moment head-on by asking both a philosophical and operational question: **Why democracy — and how must it evolve to be fit for purpose in the 21st century?**

Today’s democracies were built for a different era. Their structures are rigid where agility is needed, reactive where anticipation is required, and designed for slow deliberation in a world defined by exponential shocks. The challenge is not simply to defend democratic norms, but to design democratic systems capable of learning, adapting, and delivering — linking democratic legitimacy to performance, equity and long-term security.

Rooted in the Greek capital’s legacy as both the birthplace of democracy and a laboratory for its reinvention, this year’s Forum will bring together policymakers, civil society, activists, technologists, artists and young leaders to imagine and test viable alternatives. Through workshops, debates, panel discussions and keynote conversations, we’ll seek to reaffirm the tenets of democracy, while refining and expanding what it means today. We’ll also move beyond rhetoric to showcase democracy in action — not as a static ideal, but as a living system capable of transforming itself, shaping the digital age, and becoming an ally to human and planetary flourishing. Democratic renewal cannot wait for institutional reform; it must be prototyped in real time.

The task is urgent, but the proposition is hopeful: **democracy can change the world — if it learns how to change itself.**

Topics Include:

Opening New York Times-Style Debate: Democracy's Identity Crisis

At a time when its proponents are dwindling and strongmen are unrestrained, is democracy still fit for purpose in 2026?

Rethinking Security: It's the Energy, Stupid

Beyond the war (and because of it), 2026 may be remembered as the year that energy took center stage. Before the year even began, China was flaunting its investment in renewables at the annual COP meeting on climate, while the U.S. sat out the event. Then in January, the U.S. captured Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, and proceeded to seize control of the country's oil production. And finally, Iran's retaliatory closure of the Strait of Hormuz nearly brought the world economy to a halt. These cascading crises have shattered any lingering illusions about the separation of energy, security and economic stability. Does our continued reliance on fossil fuels serve as the very architect of our insecurity?

Rethinking Journalism: Is Knowledge Still Power?

The traditional news media had been in retreat for two decades before the onslaught of social media, misinformation, ideology, tribalism and an obsolete business model. Paradoxically, that makes an independent media all the more important. What is to be done? We talk to leading voices about why and how journalism calls power to account, and the challenges — and necessity — of pressing ahead.

Rethinking Governance: Forecasting Autocracy

Three out of four people in the world now live in autocracies, while only 26 percent live in democracies, according to VDEM Institute's latest report. What's more, some of those states still considered democracies are slipping away from established norms. What are the obvious and more subtle ways that authoritarianism starts to set in? We look at the historical precedents and contemporary examples that signal what creeping autocracy looks like, and what it really means for the people who live it every day.

Rethinking Memes: Teens Take On Social Media

In March, social media had what many are calling its "Big Tobacco" moment – when a jury in California found that platforms' addictive design led to a young woman's mental health problems. Meanwhile, countries around the world, and potentially the entire European Union, are pushing up the minimum age for accessing social apps, citing everything from doomscrolling to dangerous content. What do teens themselves think about the issues and the changes, and what would they do if they ruled the world? We invite them to lead a discussion on the best next steps.

Case Study: Russia

"Russia is not underdeveloped; it's misdeveloped," a Russian once quipped. It has rich culture, cutting-edge science and endless resources, but it seems incapable of wise rule. The war on Ukraine is a tragic case in point. What's more, democracy — beyond seeming

unattainable — has become an object of scorn. What is the problem, in both historical and current terms? What is the solution?

Case Study: Iran

No matter what happens with the war in Iran, it's undeniable that the entire region has been changed forever. Rich kingdoms that seemed to operate in a parallel universe from their large neighbor are no longer shielded from its complex story, economically or emotionally. Meanwhile, nationalist sentiments are growing stronger both inside and outside the country. Is there any hope for lasting peace? What futures are possible for a region on fire?

Keynote Conversation: Mightier Than the Sword

Can culture pull more levers than traditional forms of diplomacy?

Aristotle Address at the Stoa of Attalos

Corollary Events:

- AI and Ethics Module
- NGO Innovation Showcase
- Teens for Democracy
- Policymakers' Caucus

Confirmed Speakers:

Eliza Anyangwe, Editor in Chief, The Fuller Project

Martin Baron, Journalist and Former Executive Editor, The Washington Post

Owen Gaffney, Chief Impact Officer, The Nobel Prize and Co-Founder, Earth4All and Exponential Roadmap Initiative

William Gates, Executive Director, Mechanics of Democracy Laboratory, Arizona State University

Jacob Udo-Udo Jacob, Co-Founder and Executive Director, Global Center for Rehumanizing Democracy

Tawakkol Karman, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Journalist and Human Rights Activist

Parag Khanna, Author, Founder and C.E.O., AlphaGeo

Kathleen Kingsbury, Opinion Editor, The New York Times

Nanna-Louise Linde, Vice President, European Government Affairs, Microsoft

Xiaoyu Lu, Assistant Professor, School of International Studies, Peking University

David Pressman, Lawyer and Former United States Ambassador to Hungary

Ece Temelkuran, Journalist and Author

Laura Thornton, Senior Democracy Expert

Nate Wilbourne, Youth and Environmental Advocate and Founder, Gen-Z Aotearoa

Edward C. Wingenbach, President, American College of Greece