

# böll thema

Chile: Antonia Orellana's  
fight for women's rights

Germany: Banda Communale  
– drumming up support  
against right wingers

Thailand: iLaw –  
crowdsourcing legislation

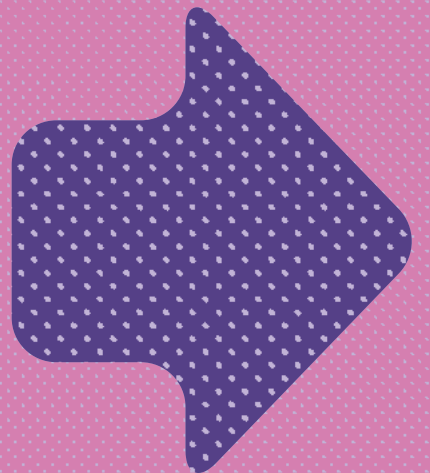
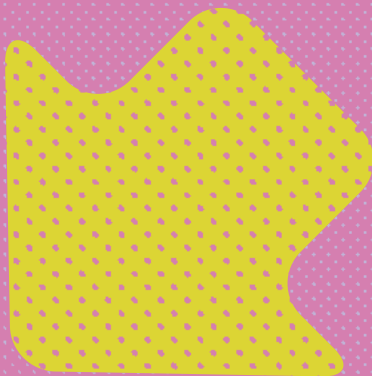
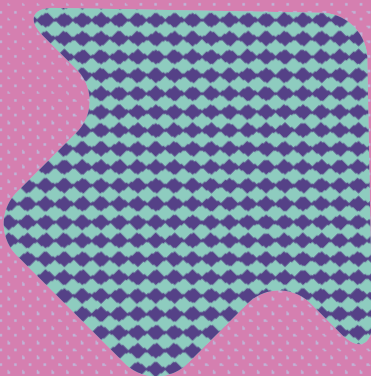
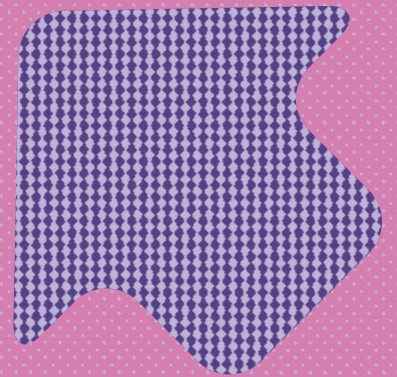
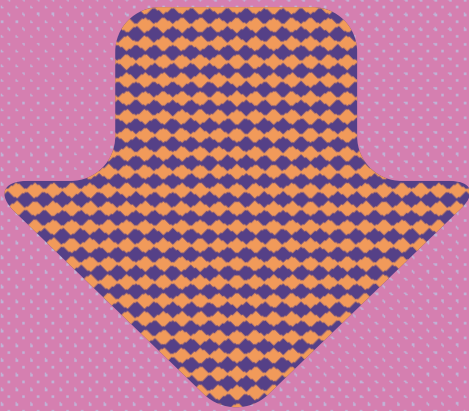
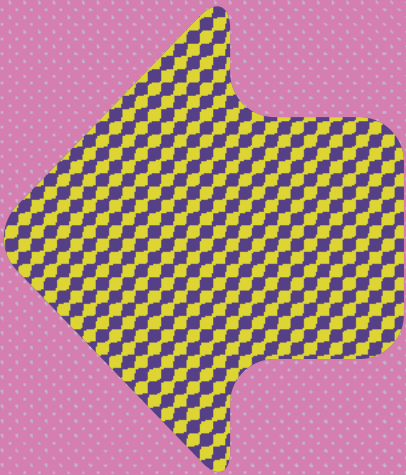
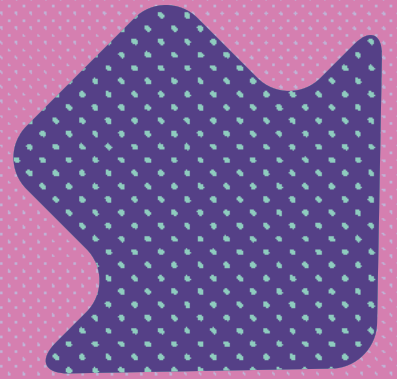
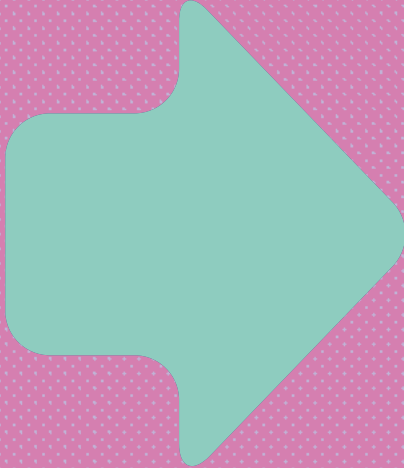
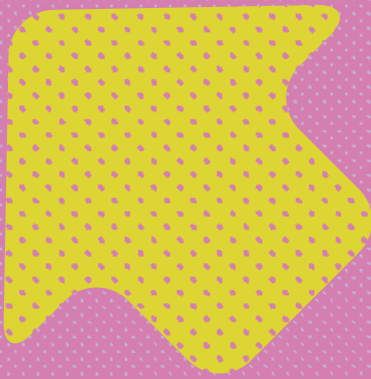
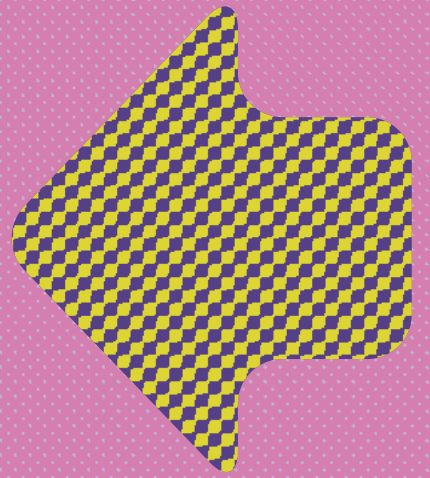
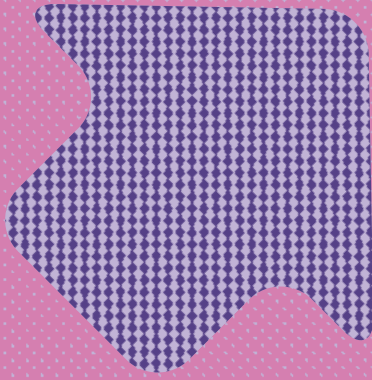
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The magazine of the Heinrich Böll Foundation



# Democracy

Diverse avenues towards one common goal



Around the world, democracy is under challenge as personal freedoms, the free press, voting rights, and judiciaries are being curtailed by far-right political forces that openly pursue anti-democratic agendas. We are experiencing the same here in Europe. Under threat of violence and intimidation, people and organizations are deterred from expressing their opinions, from exercising their rights, and from publicly advocating for a just, dignified, and ecological future.

The people, however, refuse to accept that. They continue to champion human rights, democracy, and gender justice, transforming our energy system, and sustainable agriculture and resource management. They insist that courts administer justice and that the population be informed about grievances and solutions. This is what I took away from many of the conversations I led with our partners – be it in Mexico, India, Kenya, Argentina, Chile, Israel, or the Palestinian territories.

Strengthening democratic actors – whether in civil society, political parties, or governments – and democratic institutions is a shared global task; it is central to our work at the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. As a token of our solidarity and as encouragement, we dedicate this issue to people who impressed us with their commitment to democracy. Without dedication and action, there can be no democracy. And without democracy, everything is for naught.



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Imme Scholz,  
President of  
the Heinrich-Böll-  
Stiftung

Imme Scholz

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For over twenty years, *Banda Comunale* and its joyful music have been getting under the skin of Neo-Nazis in Saxony. Lately, the brass band has played mostly in support of democratic alliances in rural areas. Can they make a difference?

By David Muschenich

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Rally in Belarus against ▶ Alexander Lukashenko following the 2020 presidential election, which, domestically as well as internationally, was viewed as bogus. Mass protests had begun earlier, yet after the election police cracked down on protesters.



# Democracy lives by its people

By Rasmus  
Randig





What is the state of democracy? This question is on our minds in this year of major global elections, whether it be at home in Saxony, Thuringia, and Brandenburg, or internationally in the USA, India, or Senegal. And even in countries where no major elections are scheduled this year, we are keenly monitoring the state of the rule of law, civil liberties, and opportunities for individuals to be heard and participate in political decision-making – either with hope or concern. Diverse societies must negotiate diverging, sometimes even conflicting needs and interests. The only sustainable and peaceful way to achieve this is participation and involvement, especially regarding the central issues of our time: peace and security, prosperity and fair distribution of wealth, as well as the socio-ecological transformation, all of which must be driven both at the individual and the collective level. As Imme Scholz, President of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, writes in her editorial, “Without democracy, everything is for naught.”

Democracies worldwide have been facing significant challenges in recent years. Citizens of autocracies who advocate for human rights and reform are under constant threat of repression and violence. Their scope for action continues to shrink.

In the wake of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a series of successes for democracy fueled a spirit of optimism in the 1990s and early 2000s. During the past two decades, this optimism has given way to resignation, or at least to a sense of uncertainty. Studies by the *Varieties of Democracy Institute* show a shift in indicators for rule of law and individual freedoms, such as the right to assembly or free expression. Images of imprisoned regime critics and of violence against peaceful protesters are ubiquitous.

#### **Fighting for the rule of law, free expression, and political participation**

These images, however, also demonstrate people's willingness to fight for political participation and their rights, despite – or perhaps precisely because of – repression. We see lawyers and judges upholding the rule of law; journalists and podcasters exercising their freedom of expression; activists, party members, and ministers practicing political participation. They work under widely varying conditions – from an open political culture with readily available resources and built-in opportunities for participation, all the way to persecution, violence, and surveillance. Many accept the risk of losing their freedom or even life and limb. They willingly subordinate their personal fate to a greater collective cause. Their actions prove that they still have hope for a better and fairer future. Images of people engaged in peaceful protest on the streets of Hong Kong, Minsk, or Yangon, all while facing down state security forces, are a powerful testimony to this persistence. While there are many ways to advocate for political participation and human rights, peaceful protest has always played a special role in the recent history of



democracy, initiating and consolidating further developments. This issue tells the stories of individuals and organizations and their various ways to engage or stand in solidarity with democratic movements in their home countries. What drives these people? How do they engage? What challenges do they face? In conclusion, we will also address what political forces can do to empower these people.

A protest movement might evolve into a new political party. But things can also go quite differently, depending on the actors' circumstances, motivation, and opportunities. In our interview (p. 12), Chilean Antonia Orellana recounts how her environment has shaped her political views since she was a child. From a young age, her family took her to protests. Later, as a student representative, she advocated for her fellow students. After a career as a feminist activist, incoming President Gabriel Boric appointed her Minister for Women and Gender Equality. Dzmitry Shershan and Ina Valitskaya had a completely different experience protesting against the Lukashenko regime in Belarus. They were forced to flee their home country and are now politically active in German exile as members of the Razam association, which keeps the dream of a democratic Belarus alive (p. 27). Hosni el Mokhlis was briefly engaged in party politics after the pro-democracy protests in Morocco in 2011 (p. 24), but soon felt the urge to leverage his skills as a playwright. Today, he creates new spaces for social debate with his “Theater of the Oppressed”.

▲ On August 7, 2024, supporters of the “Move Forward Party” protested against a ruling by Thailand's Supreme Court, to ban the party. The “Move Forward Party” was social-democratic in outlook and campaigned against the Thai military's meddling in politics. In the 2023 parliamentary elections it had won more seats than any other political party, thus becoming the largest opposition party.



### Promoting social cohesion and making it a real-life experience

Civic engagement can also mean helping other people expand their opportunities and encouraging them to advocate for their rights and those of others. The initiative iLaw, founded in Thailand in 2009, empowers people to effectively engage with democratic reform processes, in particular in the digital space. Our report highlights their successes (p. 10). Even soundscapes can offer a safe space to collectively stand up for democracy in public. The *Banda Communale* has been attending protests for more than 20 years, using music as a vehicle to foster social cohesion and make it a real-life experience (p. 40).

Just as the forms and spaces of engagement change over time, political goals and visions also evolve via discussion and confrontation. Antonia Orellana remembers that the relationship between leftist political activism and feminism in Chile was not always an easy one, which motivated her to found her own, more inclusive party. In his essay, Jovan Džoli Ulićević, director of the *Transbalkan* organization, wonders why many pro-democracy movements in the Balkans are still reluctant to stand in solidarity with queer movements, while anti-democratic forces do not hesitate to associate and vilify both movements (p. 22). And, lastly, as an observer and commentator on EU politics, Rosa Balfour analyzes the rise of far-right parties, challenging us to explore why established parties seem to have lost the trust of many (p. 36).

Solidary with democratic actors requires targeted efforts. Our six portraits on page 16 are examples of the many possible pathways from one form of commitment to another, for instance from activism to institutionalized politics. The column features personalities who have sought and found their way into and out of politics. Their stories show that there are many ways to support democracy, depending on personal experiences, motivations, and resources. Yet they all share one common trait - the courage to continually question one's own assumptions. Democracy draws its strength from openness to change and the ability to correct its course whenever necessary.

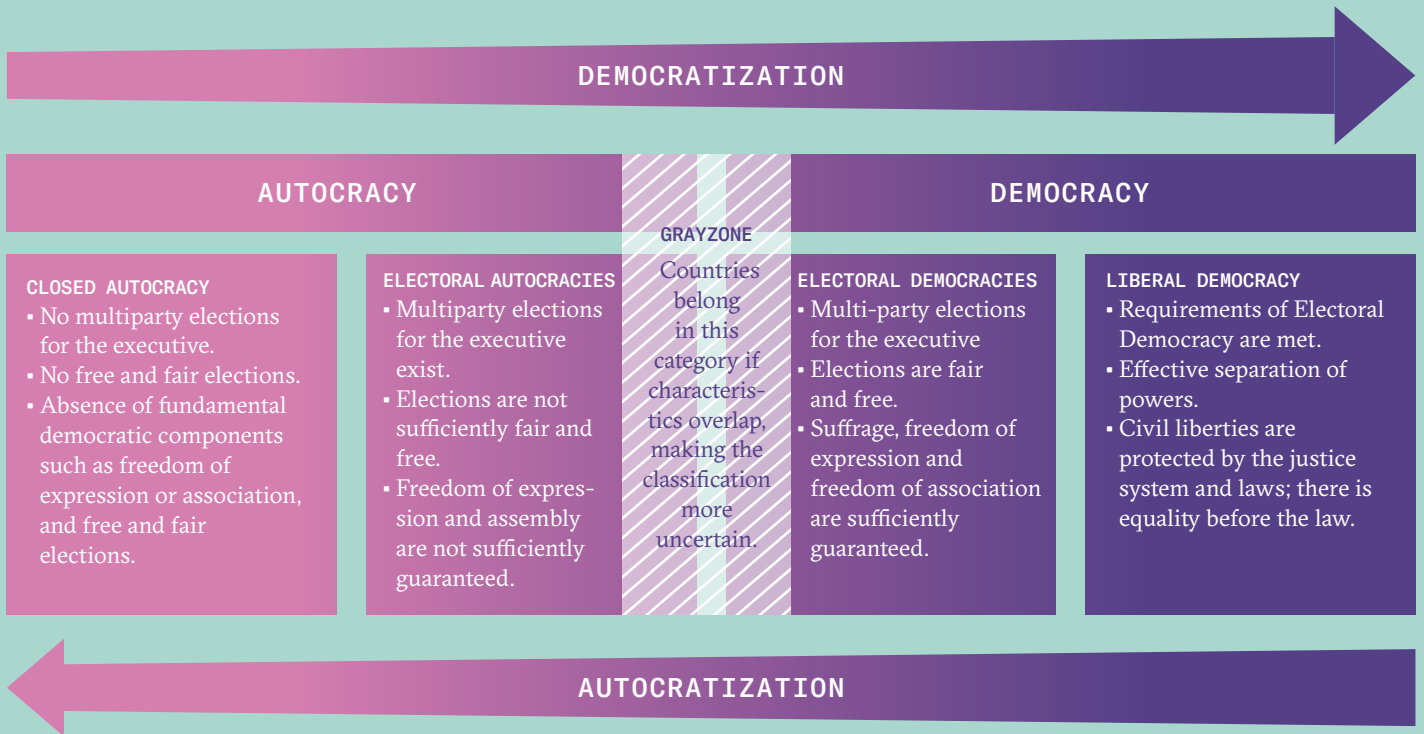
**The key is to always be alert, listen, and ask questions.**

Strengthening democracy worldwide is also a fundamental principle of democratic foreign policy. Its stakeholders, whether they act on behalf of civil society, philanthropy, or governments, must engage with different perspectives. They must align their goals with their tools and resources and be able to learn from setbacks. Indian social scientist Neha Dahab illustrates that even fundamental democratic principles such as secularism can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In order to communicate and learn from each other, all parties must be willing to translate the others' norms and experiences (p. 31). Sergio Rodriguez Prieto discusses how the toolkit of foreign policy can be adapted to serve peaceful, pro-democratic protest movements (p. 33). Green-party MP Schahina Gambir analyzes the political lessons Germany must learn from its engagement in Afghanistan in order to maintain its credibility as an advocate of democracy and human rights worldwide (p. 35). Her contribution shows that every location and every situation continuously challenges both actors and supporters to listen, look, and ask questions. Democracy thrives on constant adaptation. It's what makes it resilient.

Empowering people to advocate for political participation and individual freedoms is a global task. European democracies can learn from other countries' experiences, since they often face similar problems, such as disinformation. Elene Panchulidze joins Rosa Balfour in describing the challenges to the democratic makeup of the European Union, both in terms of its internal decision-making processes and guarding against external influences (Dossier, p. 9). In Saxony, pro-democratic forces explore ways to encourage and motivate people to stand up against right-wing extremism. *Banda Comunale* has found that loud music is a great motivator (p. 40).

The final contribution in this issue comes from Afghanistan. It makes a passionate plea not to abandon the country's democratic-minded citizens, but instead continue international engagement for democracy and human rights, even in the face of dire adversity (p. 44).

Rasmus Randig is Head of Program for International Democracy and Deputy Head of Unit for Global Support for Democracy and Human Rights at the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Brussels. He studied Economic and Social History in Glasgow and Konstanz and worked in Crisis Prevention and Stabilization at the German Foreign Office.



Regime and regime change

Source: V-Dem: DEMOCRACY REPORT 2024

# Democracy in figures

By Heike  
Holdinghausen

Globally, democracies and their advocates are under mounting pressure. This is in contrast to the aftermath of the Cold War, when optimism reigned in many places. Democracies are not static systems. Societies evolve, both in terms of geography and their democratic fabric. Citizens and civil society must fight to regain or maintain political agency and their freedoms.



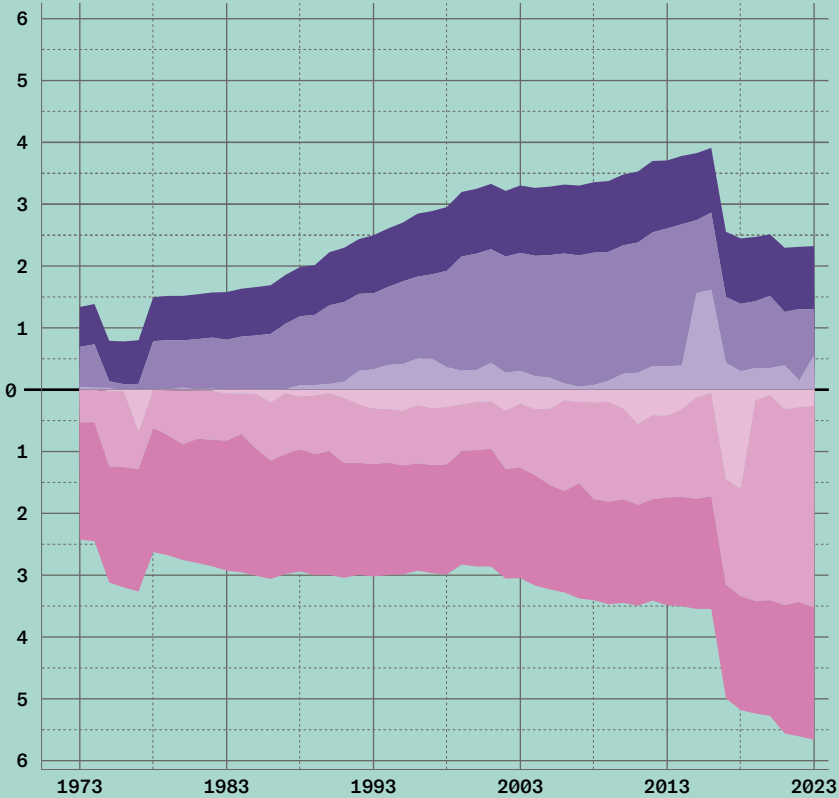
# Forms of government and how they evolve

In political science, the term “democratization” means that a country increasingly assumes characteristics of democratic systems, such as free and fair elections, or the right to free expression.

Its development is considered independently of the original situation of a given state. In an autocracy, democratization can mean a certain liberalization, whereas in a democracy, it might mean a further expansion of existing freedoms or greater participation in decisions.

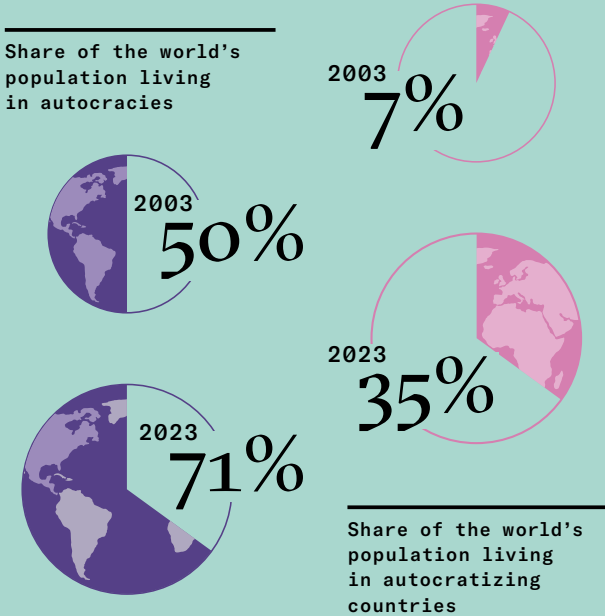
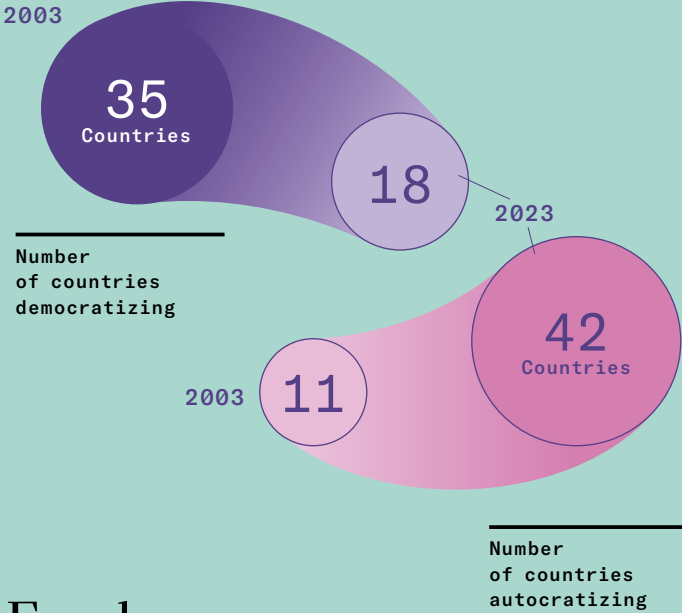
Autocratization describes the opposite development.

- Liberal democracy
- Electoral democracy
- Democratic gray zone
- Autocratic gray zone
- Electoral autocracies
- Closed autocracies



Regime types by world population, 1973-2023

Source: V-Dem: DEMOCRACY REPORT 2024



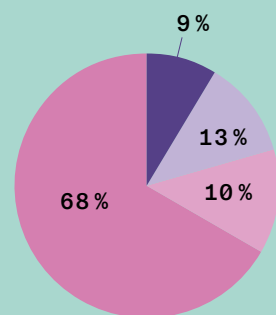
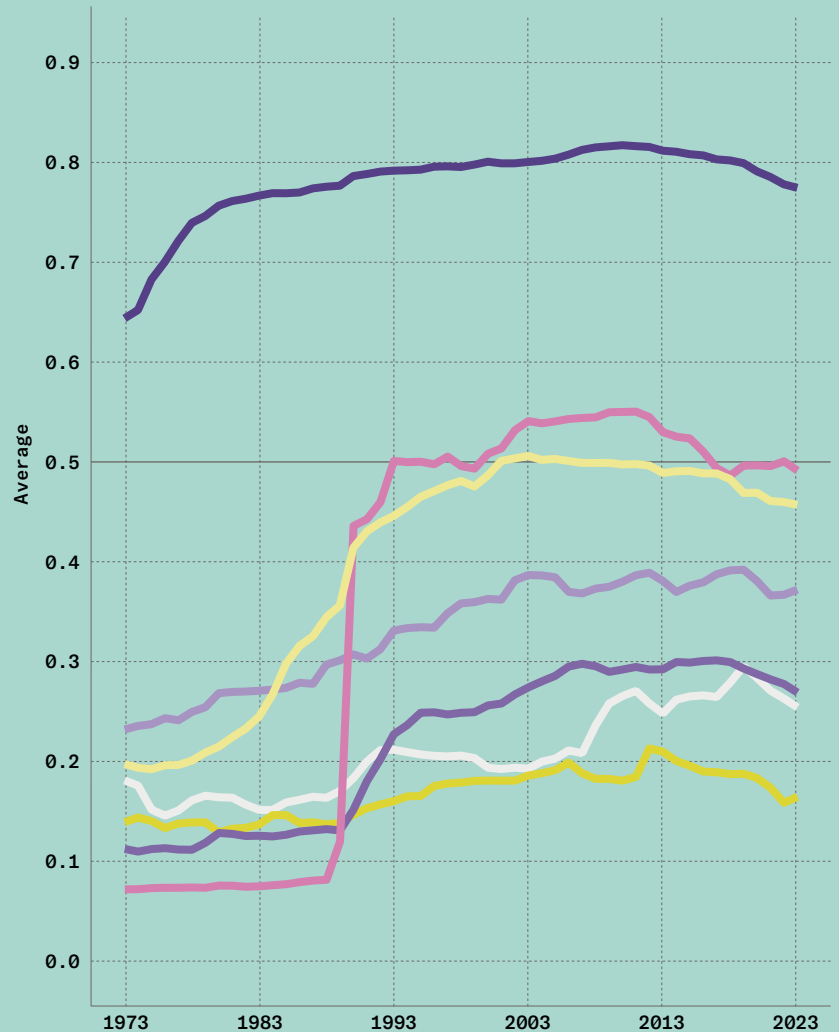
## Freedom under pressure – How 2003 compares to 2023

Dynamics of 50 years of democratization: Since 2009, more of the world's population has been living in autocracies than in democracies.

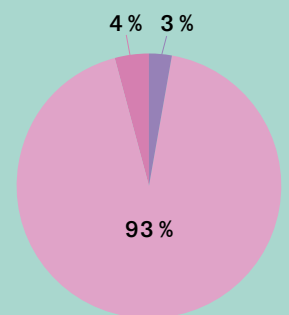
- East Asia and the Pacific
- South and Central Asia
- The Middle East and North Africa
- Sub-Saharan Africa
- Eastern Europe
- Western Europe and North America
- Latin America and the Caribbean

**Regional trends for democratization**  
Source: V-Dem: DEMOCRACY REPORT 2024

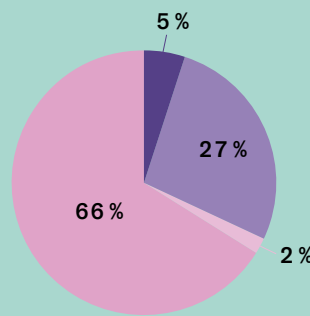
**A By countries**



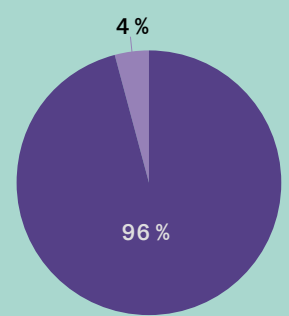
East Asia and the Pacific



South and Central Asia



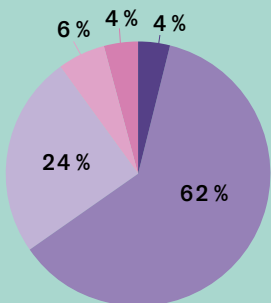
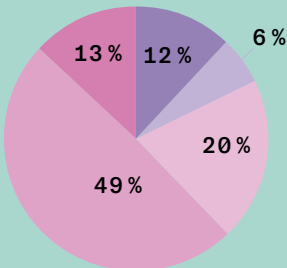
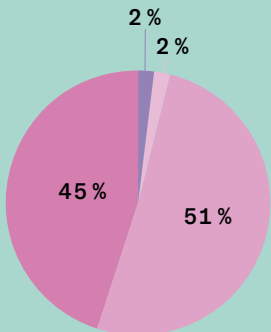
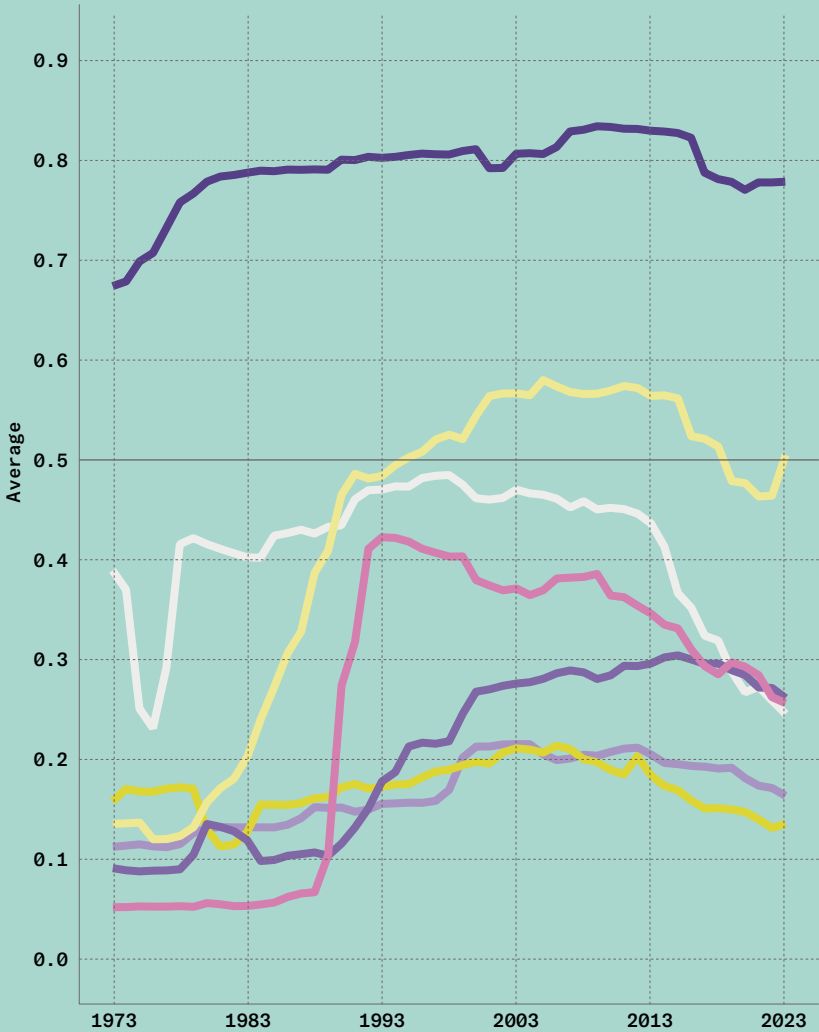
Eastern Europe



Western Europe and North America

The Democracy Report 2024 is based on data from the Swedish research institute *Varieties of Democracy* (V-Dem) at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Gothenburg. V-Dem's Index of Liberal Democracies captures various aspects of democracy, such as elections, the state of the rule of law, or freedom of expression, media, and association, as well as civil liberties. The index ranges from the lowest level of democracy (0) to the highest (1).

**B** By share of the world population



- Liberal democracy
- Electoral democracy
- Democratic gray zone
- Autocratic gray zone
- Electoral autocracies
- Closed autocracies

Regional shares of population by regime type

Source: V-Dem: DEMOCRACY REPORT 2024



Elene Panchulidze works as a scholar at the European Partnership for Democracy network in Brussels.

# Elene Panchulidze answers three questions about democracy in Europe

**How resilient have European democracies proven themselves to be in recent years, Ms. Panchulidze?**  
 So far, Europe has largely escaped the global trend towards autocratization. Even the worst cases in Eastern Europe have demonstrated a potential for democratic renewal. This resilience against authoritarianism and right-wing populism is remarkable. In recent years, Europe has been plagued by severe, multiple crises, both domestically and abroad. Democratic Europe's ability to respond to complex political crises lies primarily in its strong institutions and active citizenry.

**How democratic are the decisions of EU institutions?**  
 They are often considered technocratic and not very democratic, despite various attempts to better involve European citizens in decision-making processes at the Commission, Parliament, and the Council, such as the *Conference on the Future of Europe* or the *European Citizens' Initiative*. Yet these initiatives have failed to remedy the democratic deficit of EU institutions. The EU should make more efforts to improve democratic participation in its decisions.

**What would it take to build a "European Democracy Shield"?**  
 The debate about such a shield largely revolves around the threat of outside interference. While attacks by external actors are concerning, most of Europe's democratic woes come from within. Therefore, the EU should pursue a democratic renewal, strengthen its political parties, parliaments, and civil society organizations in order to better involve their citizens in democratic politics.





▲ During the 2023 Thai elections, “Protect your vote” was one of a number of campaigns meant to encourage people to observe the elections and report irregularities via a purpose-built website.  
© iLAW.

Since its founding in 2009, iLaw has significantly strengthened democratic participation in Thailand through innovative campaigns and targeted initiatives.

# The constitution I dream of

By Kannika Yodnin

The Kingdom of Thailand's 2017 constitution is the 20th constitution of Thailand and the country's current fundamental law. The transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy took place in 1932. Since then, several doubtful constitutional reforms have led to political difficulties and struggles.

iLaw, also known as the *Internet Dialogue on Law Reform*, was established in 2009 with the goal to promote democracy by encouraging people to exercise their right to submit legislative recommendations. Since then, using the website <http://ilaw.or.th>, iLaw has connected hundreds of people who share similar views with the aim of encouraging public engagement in the legislative process. iLaw has engaged in several public and advocacy campaigns concerning various issues such as constitutional amendments.

After martial law was imposed following the coup by the *National Council for Peace and Order* in 2014, iLaw has monitored and summarized the laws enacted by the leaders of the coup and its appointed proxies and made this available to the public.

Initiatives launched included election monitoring and petitioning for constitutional amendments. In September 2020, using the slogan "Join to dismantle, draft and create the constitution", iLaw collected 100,732 signatures in support of a proposed constitutional amendment. However, three months later, and despite these efforts, parliament voted against the proposal.

In August 2023, three months after the most recent national elections, a public sector group called the *The People's Organization for Drafting a Constitution*, employing the slogan "Rewrite the entire constitution, 100% election," collected 205,739 signatures in support, using the iLaw platform. When the Election Commission informed iLaw just three days before the deadline that, under the Referendum Act, the use of electronic signatures would be restricted, iLaw partnered with other organizations and volunteers and successfully collected more than 200,000 physical signatures within three days.

Although the transition towards an ideal constitution is still work in progress, iLaw has succeeded in raising the level of democratic participation in Thailand to a whole new level.

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Kannika Yodnin has been working at the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Southeast Asia since 2023. She is in charge of the program for democracy and participation. Her responsibilities include supporting human rights advocates as well as LGBTIQ and feminist initiatives throughout Southeast Asia.

# “Activism and politics need each other”

Interview by  
Gitte Cullmann and  
Angela Erpel Jara\*

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**As a student in high school and college, you were actively engaged in various protest movements. Today, you hold a ministerial office. What prompted you to go into politics? Was it any specific events or experiences?**

I come from a center-left family, so I was no stranger to political protest. I was born in 1989, and I remember my family taking part in the 1992 protests against the war in Iraq. I also protested against the Chilean government's CAE student loan, which plunged students in deep debt. But these were all not really conscious decisions. It came naturally.

**You joined student protests very early on – how did that come about?**

At the end of 2006, I ran for a student government position at my high school. However, in contrast to the large student protest movement of 2011 and 2012, the one in 2006 was rather apolitical. None of my female classmates engaged in political activism afterwards, although they were very motivated at the time. So I became involved in the student movement early on, but I was really a student like everyone else.

**You then went on to study journalism. What specific projects did you pursue at university?**

At the time, we founded an organization called the “School for Popular Communication”. That was before everything went digital. We basically developed and deployed very simple social media tactics for social movements and press organizations. When digitalization really took off, I worked for several organizations. But I became really active around 2014, after Melissa Sepúlveda was elected president of the *Federation of Students*



▲ Antonia Orellana



of the University of Chile (FECH). I was part of her campaign team and later her operative team, and from then on, I have been more or less active in the spectrum I just described.

**Was this your first step towards organized representation of interests, towards institutional politics?**

I think so. After all, it is a federation of students. The university has precise rules on how, where and by whom students are represented, for example on the University Council, but also in the administration. Yes, I think that my path was already foreshadowed there, especially regarding my commitment to feminism.

**What role did feminism play for you during this time?**

It was always a kind of dilemma, because back then, it wasn't very common to be a feminist and a party member at the same time. Political parties had no feminist committees. At some point, you had to choose between the movement or the party. I chose the party, and then, I was one of only a few feminists who decided to pursue this path. There were, of course, women's rights activists, for example in the *Red Chilena* network, but they were no longer really active. Or they were, as some say, "dormant" members of the *Movement of Unified Popular Action*, MAPU, or the *Socialist Party PS*.

**Did you face difficulties because of this decision, or did you receive support?**

Paulina Weber Ubilla was a mentor to me back then. She herself was a left-wing activist and, until her death in 2020, a member of MEMCH, the Chilean women's emancipation movement that was founded in 1938. At the time, she encouraged me to stick with active party politics. But there were tensions, especially during the election campaigns. Of course I was associated with *Red Chilena*, which the network members didn't like at all, if only because it was an assembly of politically highly diverse voices. That meant we had to be very careful.

**How do you view your path today - away from rather autonomous grassroots activism and towards institutional politics?**

Well, in my opinion, it wasn't a conventional transition. In fact, my colleagues and I did not join a traditional party, but founded a new political force, the party *Social Convergence*, or short CS. And we wanted many feminists to get involved in it. Incidentally, I have always been reluctant to bring up the age of politicians and activists of the *Frente Amplio* (the "Broad Front" of Chilean left-wing parties and movements), or generally to reduce the whole discussion to a generational issue, as has been the case time and

again. Of course, we are a young cabinet, but we represent all of society. Our main approach is to change the concept of the subsidiary state, which outsources basic public services to private companies. And this is a project for society as a whole.

**You specifically wanted to bring in feminists. Has anything changed in the relationship between activism and institutional politics in Chile now?**

Social organizations have always shown a high degree of political commitment. Almost all feminist members of the MEMCH movement were communists. The famous feminist silence on political issues began with what is known as the "Damned Law" (*Ley Maldita*), which banned the Chilean Communist Party in 1948. Many MEMCH members stayed home - not because there were no feminist causes left to fight for, but because they knew that under Pinochet's dictatorship, they would end up in the Pisagua concentration and torture camp. On this point, I think we in the feminist movement are wrong to assume that our story was highly exceptional. In fact, the entire social movement had been shattered: the trade union movement, and also the student movement, which only regrouped in 1997-98.

**You went from activism to institutional politics at an early age. Based on your experience, how would you describe the limits and opportunities of each avenue?**

Both have their advantages. Activism is, of course, something very fluid, very self-governed. You decide the direction you want to take. The advantage of a political organization is that it voluntarily places collective decisions above individual ones. In this sense, activism and party politics are very different avenues, of course, but I think they need each other. I don't see how anything could be achieved without activism. But I don't think we can do without political parties, either.

**What was it like for you to be appointed minister - to suddenly be in the limelight, to be part of a large apparatus?**

As a journalist and working for the presidency of the University of Chile, I had interacted with authorities before. So it wasn't my first contact with public administration. I was also aware of the problem of being exposed to public opinion. But one thing people don't fully appreciate is the impact on the family. Because it's different when you're as young as I am. At 35, I'm not that young, but all my sisters and cousins are more or less my age. They are in the middle of their professional lives and do not have secure careers yet.

Former activist Antonia Orellana, who has served as Chile's Minister for Women and Equality since 2022, has leveraged her career in politics to bring feminist and social concerns into the government. She is convinced that real change can only be achieved through a combination of activist engagement, creative political action, and, above all, open debate.

«Because of the mutual distrust between different camps, people do not communicate enough with each other. The cognitive distortions generated by technology are doing the rest»

**What specifically has your family experienced as a result of your ministerial post?**

For example, the fact that my sister, who is a film producer, has no access to public funding because of Chile's anti-nepotism laws. Before accepting the position, I did consider my son and what the heightened attention would do to him, but I hadn't expected this kind of impact on other people in my immediate environment.

**Regarding the presidential election campaign, the social upheaval, the constitutional reform, and your challenging work in government, what keeps you going in today's Chilean politics?**

In politics, there are motivating as well as very discouraging factors at play. For example, I organized the first congress on non-sexist education together with fellow students at the University of Concepción in 2014 with a budget of only around 50 euros, so virtually without money. That was encouraging. It showed me that there is a public way of resolving conflicts by way of an open exchange. Another great experience was the nationwide conferences on non-sexist education, which were held at well over 70 % of schools from 7th grade upwards. These are the kinds of things that make you persevere. Besides, I'm not alone. Even though I'm the one in government, the public face - we are a whole generation, not in the sense that we are all the same age, but in that we have a common denominator: We are all working to ensure the success of *Frente Amplio*. This also includes bringing the feminist cause to the fore.

**What was the most important insight you gained as you learned the ropes of being a minister? What would you highlight, in particular?**

I think two things are relevant. For one, we shouldn't pretend that everything is a novelty and happening for the first time. They often say that this government is facing unprecedented obstacles or hostility from the press. I don't know if our government and our president are treated better or worse than those who came before, or whether previous governments experienced such a strong impetus for change while facing such strong opposition. I wouldn't bet on it. I think the difference is that we had elections every year. That was very unfortunate indeed. But it was an important experience from which we learned our lessons.

**And the second point?**

It has to do with the age gap and diversity. It is important to include other experiences and backgrounds. Not everyone at the Ministry for Women and Equality comes from feminism, which, I think, is a good thing. This may sound like management jargon, but I think that diversity within teams is very important.

**There are two years left in your term. What will they look like?**

The topic of nursing care is currently one of the major issues for us. It is to be the legacy of President Gabriel Boric's government. We want to rethink what prosperity means. So far, we have not faced this discussion the same way Europeans have. Why not? Because they have been living in welfare states and we haven't. For this reason alone, we have no idea what social security actually means. I believe that the political left today is making a big mistake in wanting to return to a world that no longer exists - with the idea that a labor contract is the path to social prosperity.

**What is your answer to this?**

With our draft for a Chilean law on support and nursing care, we want to show that care is a social issue and not an individual problem that can be solved through payments. This will not be easy, and it will take time. However, I believe that countries that did not enjoy social welfare in the past have an opportunity to have a whole new debate on this idea. We can also rekindle a critical debate on the subsidiary state. The *Frente Amplio* and the Minister for Development and Family, Javiera Toro Cáceres, show that there is another way to approach care and the welfare state - a Chilean way.

**In addition to nursing care, the issue of abortion is also a central topic of feminist politics and currently highly contested. What has happened so far, where does the debate stand today?**

I believe that social decriminalization has gained a lot of momentum in recent years. When I started working actively on behalf of the political left, I almost got expelled from an organization because I held a workshop in which abortion came up as a topic. Self-determined, free abortion was and is very important throughout Latin America. This is why we will continue to persistently pursue our strategy of social decriminalization. This will be a difficult debate in congress. However, as other

examples show, such as the debate on divorce law, an open discussion is crucial if we are to change the way our society thinks.

**Regarding your main political concerns, what is your take on the role of international organizations as political actors?**

We have worked very hard for Inter-American cooperation, for example with the *Belém do Pará Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Elimination of Violence against Women*. Other Latin American leftists decided to leave the system of the *Organization of American States (OAS)* because they disagreed with some of its leadership. This vacuum has now been filled by anti-democratic groups. For Chilean women in particular, the inter-American human rights system has always been key to achieve progress on the *Convention of Belém do Pará*. We advocated very strongly for membership of the OAS, with all that it entails, which is not all positive.

**Can you give an example?**

For Lidia Casas, a Chilean lawyer who had run for the *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights*, it was a very thankless experience to see local anti-democratic groups campaign against her in Washington. Thanks to South-South cooperation, and with 144 votes, mainly from middle-income countries, we now got Patsilí Toledo elected as the first Chilean member of the Committee of the *UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. She is a Chilean lawyer who campaigns against gender-based violence. That was so important. When Trump took office, the international human rights system and its agencies faced a financing crisis because the United States cut funding significantly. In addition, many people do not fully understand the concept of human rights, since conservatives and right-wing parties try to portray it as left-wing ideology.

**How do you view the global challenges for democracy and human rights?**

I believe that today the international human rights system is in deep crisis, primarily because of the crisis in Gaza, but also the war in Ukraine. In my opinion, these are two pivotal points. These conflicts and their resolution will shape the coming decades. The human rights system as a whole is on the brink: Its governance, its limits, its scope of action. This became abundantly clear to me at the meeting of the *UN Commission on the Status of Women* in New York. Firstly, countries that do not respect women's human rights were entrusted with the leadership of the next commission. Secondly, there was almost no debate on Palestine or, here in the Americas, on Haiti, nor about the fact that more Venezuelan women live in the diaspora than Syrian women. These failures clearly show the gaps in a system that is supposed to protect human rights. And they are currently key factors in determining the direction this world is taking. I think that the European and American political left has a special responsibility here. They are obviously the ones with a particular focus on protecting international human rights. In countries that are involved in international politics, progressives should now reflect very carefully on how this deep crisis has come about.

**What would you say to the next generations who want to become active in politics? What should they know when they chose this path?**

I think the most important thing in the current situation is not to assume that you will win just because you are right. These are two completely different things. I can be very convinced that I'm right and still fail spectacularly – even though I'm right. Because of the mutual distrust between different camps, people do not

communicate enough with each other. The cognitive distortions generated by technology are doing the rest. For me, it is crucial that we feminists are ready and willing to have a dialog.

**What can this dialog look like?**

We need to create alternative ways of communicating with the other half of the population because if we don't, the way the world is going, we will have women who are increasingly liberal, and I do not mean on the progressive left, but liberal, and men who are increasingly reactionary, not necessarily conservative, but reactionary. This means that if we do not adapt our feminist and left-wing strategy, then, for a long time to come, we will only have the support of female voters. And we will have right-wing extremism that is driven by men.

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Antonia Orellana is a journalist from the University of Chile. She was part of the feminist network "Red Chilena contra la violencia hacia las mujeres" (Chilean Network against violence against women). She is a co-founder of *Convergencia Social*, President Gabriel Boric's party, and currently serves as Minister of Women and Gender Equality of the Chilean government.

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Gitte Cullmann is a sociologist and economist from *Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster*. Since 2020, she has been Head of the International Office of the *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung* in Santiago de Chile (regional office for Bolivia, Chile, and Peru).

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Angela Erpel Jara is a sociologist from the University of Chile. She holds a Master's degree in Habitat and Urban Poverty in Latin America from the University of Buenos Aires and is a graduate of Gender, Politics and Citizen Participation. She currently serves as democracy and human rights coordinator at the *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung* Santiago de Chile.

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# Switching camps

Interviews:  
Christina Focken  
Illustrations:  
Marie Guillard

## Marie Hélène Ndiaye, Dakar, Senegal

Marie Hélène Ndiaye clearly remembers when and why she became an activist. In high school, two students ran for president of the English club, a boy and a girl. "I voted for the girl because she was better than the guy." Many other students felt the same way. When she won, one of the boys protested: "A lady won't lead us." A teacher then told the winning candidate: "Okay, no problem, let him lead and you will be the vice president." Ndiaye decided to fight against this injustice. A few years later, she not only became president of her high school English club, but eventually founded her own English club and advocated for women's issues. Time and again, people asked her to get involved in politics. "But I was not interested." When she realized there were only a few jobs for women at the municipal level, she changed her mind. "The only women there did jobs like clean the building. So I said to myself, something needs to happen." In 2014, at the age of 23, she became a city councilor, advocating for causes like better positions for women. Eventually, however, she experienced age and gender discrimination within her own party. "This was the same injustice I was fighting back in high school." She left the party, and she intends to continue her political career in the near future as an independent candidate.





## Daniel Langthasa, Haflong, Assam, India

For a long time, Daniel Langthasa didn't think he would ever become a politician. One of the issues that kept him out of politics was the need to "compromise in some way or the other." "I was enjoying the freedom I had with my form of musical activism." Using the moniker Mr India, Daniel Langthasa uses sarcasm and parody in his music to criticize politics and social issues, especially in his home region of Northeast India, a tribal area governed by so-called Autonomous Councils. In 2017, government employees in Langthasa's hometown of Haflong went a whole year without salary. When they protested, the police resorted to violence and arrested some union members. "For a year, I tried making an impact, organizing protests, even in the capital, Delhi." When he returned to Haflong, reflecting on all that had happened in the past 12 months, he made a decision: "We are trying to convince the people who are in power. It would be better to set an example and become a better politician." He joined the Indian National Congress and was elected to the Autonomous Council. In 2022, after about four years, Langthasa left the party because he felt that many of his fellow members cared mostly about their careers, while issues that mattered to him, such as the environment, were being neglected. "My background was in activism. I wanted real change to happen, a change in politics." Langthasa recently established a committee to protect the rights of indigenous groups in Northeast India. He is also involved in founding a new regional party.

Activism and politics often overlap and complement each other, and yet, the two fields are very different. What makes people transition between them? Six biographical sketches of people who decided to switch from one camp to the other, and sometimes back again.



## Barbara Lochbihler, Berlin, Germany

In 2006, when Germany held the Presidency of the Council of the EU, Barbara Lochbihler's task as representative of *Amnesty International* was to compile human rights demands and convey them to the German government. "In this context, I took a closer look at the European Union and its actions on behalf of human rights." At the time, Barbara Lochbihler was the Secretary General of *Amnesty International Germany*. The topic of human rights has been with her since her college days in Munich when she joined an autonomous women's group. This was her first involvement with women's rights in Germany and the Global South. "Then, at the age of 50, I considered if and how I could make a difference on behalf of human rights as an elected official." In 2009, Lochbihler ran for the European Parliament as a German Green Party candidate. Her intent was not to boost her career. "I just wanted to move laterally, not upward." In the European Parliament, Lochbihler chaired the *Human Rights Committee*, among other responsibilities. She chose not to run again in 2019, but she continues to advocate for human rights, for instance on the *UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances* and the

*International Commission against the Death Penalty*. As vice president of the *European Movement Germany*, she remains dedicated to the EU: "Wherever I go, I try to advocate for the European Union. In a critical and constructive way, of course, but always in an effort to stem rising anti-democratic forces."





## Mbali Ntuli, Durban, KwaZulu- Natal, South Africa

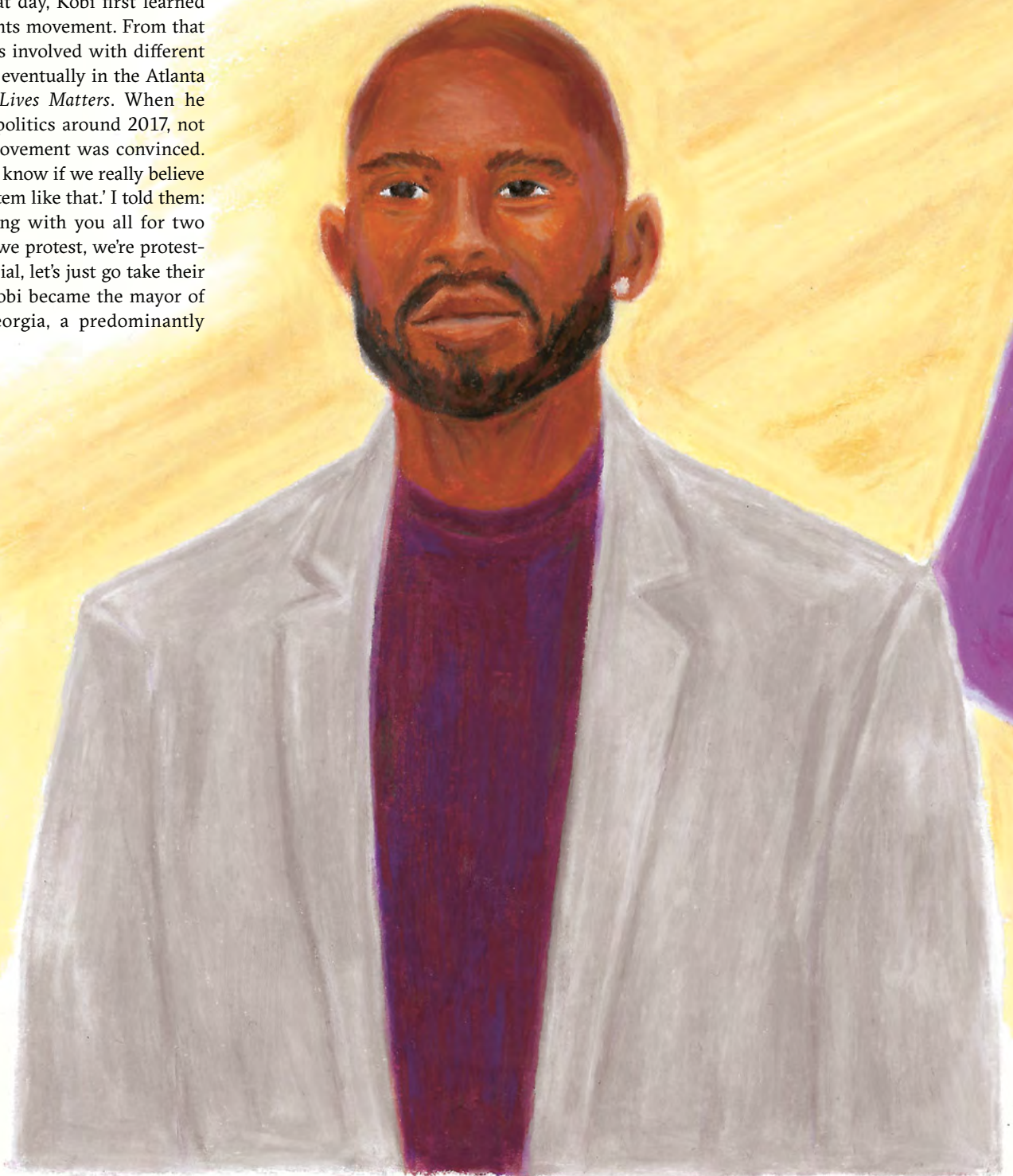
From about six years of age, Mbali Ntuli knew she wanted to have an impact on society. Many of her family members were involved in social projects and often spoke about politics. In college, she was active in the South African party *Democratic Alliance*. After graduating, she started her career in politics, serving as a city councilor and later as a member of the KwaZulu-Natal provincial legislature. However, over the years, she experienced her party as a toxic environment. Ntuli felt that the party leadership abused disciplinary procedures to control employees, among other things. Furthermore, Ntuli had major conflicts with a chairperson, some of them publicly. "I felt like a lot of what happened was against the values of the party." In 2020, Ntuli ran for the position of the *Democratic Alliance's* federal president, intending to transform the party. She lost the election, but continued to serve in the legislature of her province, KwaZulu-Natal. She remembers one night when she was writing a speech for the next day. "And as I was writing, I was thinking, I actually would rather do anything else than do this right now. I'd actually even rather die. I was really shattered by that thought because I would never, ever kill myself because I have a daughter." Ntuli sought professional help for her mental health and left the party. "I felt a great sense of relief not to be part of that bullshit any more. I still very much miss politics, though. But I've been able to transfer the skills from this period to the work I do now." Currently, Ntuli serves as CEO of *Groundwork Collective*, a group she has founded to promote civic education and social entrepreneurship.



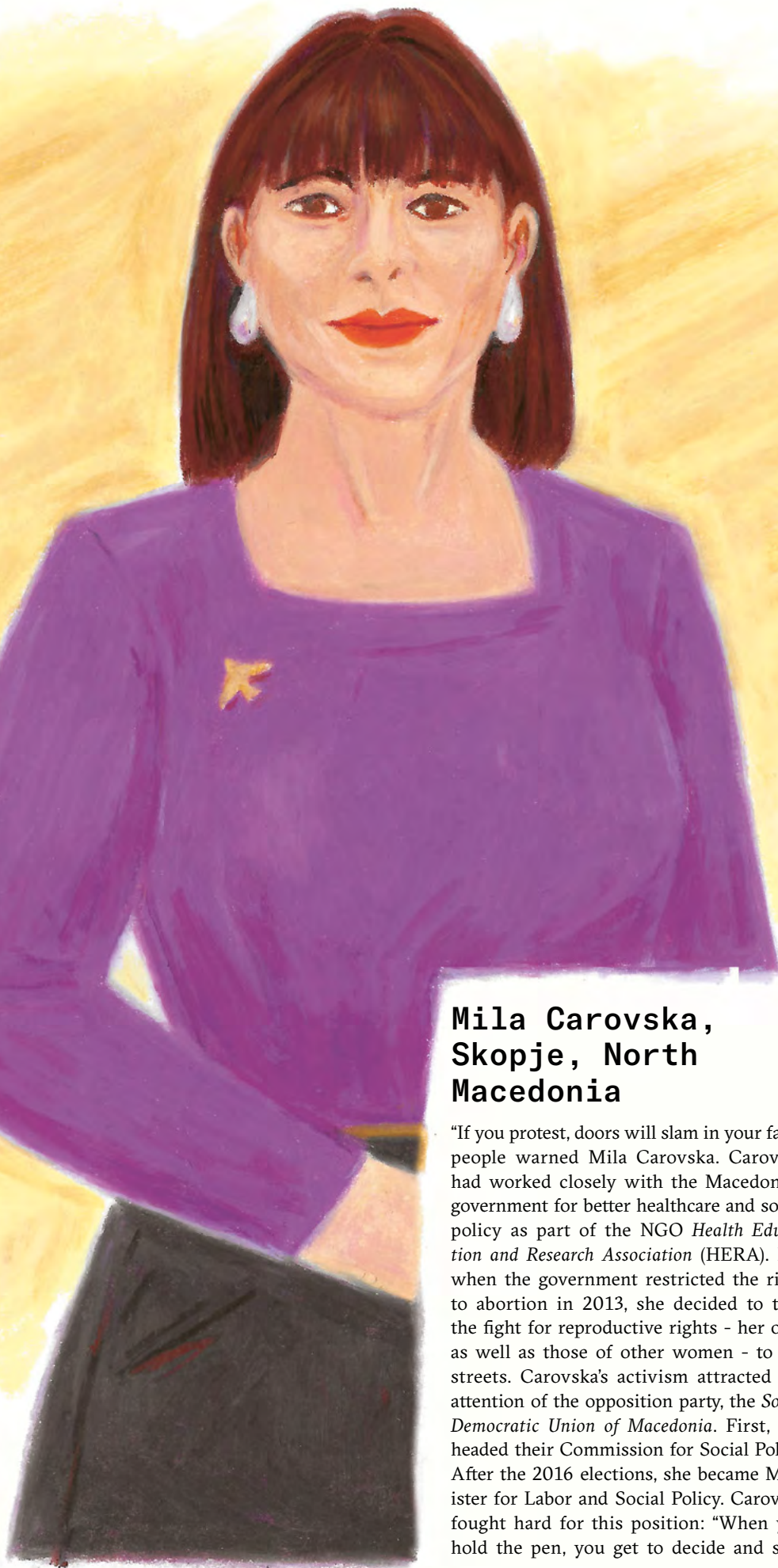
## Mayor Kobi, South Fulton, Georgia, USA

One day as a young boy, Kobi was getting dressed to go to school when his mother told him it was a holiday. He didn't know what she was talking about. His school didn't celebrate a holiday that day. "She said, 'It's Martin Luther King Day.' I asked, 'Who is Martin Luther King?' And she replied, 'They're not teaching you who that is?' She was so upset." That day, Kobi first learned about the civil rights movement. From that point on, Kobi was involved with different forms of activism, eventually in the Atlanta chapter of *Black Lives Matters*. When he transitioned into politics around 2017, not everyone in the movement was convinced. "Some said: 'I don't know if we really believe in the political system like that.' I told them: 'I've been protesting with you all for two years. Every time we protest, we're protesting an elected official, let's just go take their seats.'" In 2022, Kobi became the mayor of South Fulton, Georgia, a predominantly

Black city. For Kobi, South Fulton could act as a role model for political change. "If there's any place in America where we could really systematically start enacting these policies that we have been dreaming up in the Black Lives movement, it is this one. With a lot of progressive policies, people say: Oh, that sounds nice, but it will never work. On a local level, where stakes are small, you can show that it does actually work, and build up from there."







## Mila Carovska, Skopje, North Macedonia

“If you protest, doors will slam in your face,” people warned Mila Carovska. Carovska had worked closely with the Macedonian government for better healthcare and social policy as part of the NGO *Health Education and Research Association* (HERA). But when the government restricted the right to abortion in 2013, she decided to take the fight for reproductive rights - her own as well as those of other women - to the streets. Carovska’s activism attracted the attention of the opposition party, the *Social Democratic Union of Macedonia*. First, she headed their Commission for Social Policy. After the 2016 elections, she became Minister for Labor and Social Policy. Carovska fought hard for this position: “When you hold the pen, you get to decide and sign

the right bills.” Initially, she experienced her work as a success. Before the election, she and the finance minister had agreed on social policy reforms. Together, they were able to implement a large portion of their agenda. Yet, in 2019, there were changes in the party, including a new finance minister. Carovska felt that from then on politics revolved around corporations rather than people. “But I was still fighting for the same thing.” She continued her political career as Deputy Prime Minister of a transitional government, then as Minister of Education. In this position, one of her projects was to improve sexual education in schools. Carovska became a target of conservatives who spread false statements about her. In 2021, Carovska finally resigned. Despite of the difficulties she encountered in her political career, she is grateful for the experience. It has helped her in her current position as director of HERA, the same NGO she worked for before embarking on her political career. “Any information about the system and the political process is invaluable. There is no other place where you can learn all of this. Now everything is much easier for me.”

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Christina Focken is a freelance journalist living in Berlin, where she majored in Gender Studies and Regional Asian/African Studies. Her Master’s degree in Global Studies also took her to Bangkok and Buenos Aires.

Worldwide, forces hostile to democratic and gender democratic values are trying to exploit debates about legitimate women's and LGBTIQ rights in ways that threaten to poison societies and communities. The only remedy is the rebirth of democratic ideals, and this must include the experiences of all marginalized and oppressed groups.

# Solidarity as a political decision

An Essay by Jovan Džoli Ulicevic

I don't even know how many times I've advocated for the "inclusion" of queer and feminist movements in pro-democracy movements, conversations, and actions. More times, in fact, than discussing in spaces – activist, political, intellectual – where the connection between different social justice movements was self-explanatory and implied as an imperative. I even started calling these spaces "non-traditional" for feminism/queer activism. I was, and still am, tirelessly explaining not only benefits of the broad, inclusive, and strategic pro-democratic movements for the marginalized communities, but also for democracy and our societies itself.

On the other hand, it is hard not to notice that there has never been a dispute between anti-democratic, neofascist, right-wing movements on whether the topics of gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights, and racial/migrant justice should not only be a part, but at the core of their policies and narratives. They have centered these communities in every possible way, which efficiently provides them political and economic profit by making different marginalized people the Others who societies should fear, and therefore oppress and/or erase/expel before allegedly being oppressed by them, or by making them one of us, the tokens of inclusivity, to show off their diverse and progressive policies. In either way, narrowing many people down only to one or several marginalized identities only supports the victimhood Olympics. In the first case, these forces advocate against these communities by weaponizing misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, islamophobia and antisemitism; in the second case, the weapon is pink-washing their autocratic, colonialist, oligarchic, and autocratic mod operandi. In both cases, the cult of the victim is being empowered. This is one of the basic tools of empowering anti-democratic forces, which use the overall sense of frustration with pro-democratic policies and their failure to provide consistency and fulfil the promise of prosperity for all as a tool to manipulate.

**Are we living true inclusion by focusing on representing marginalized groups?**

Recently, I was at a very inspiring peace-building forum, where I listened to many vibrant activists and decision makers, jointly advocating for feminist peace building. While I was listening to one quite prominent feminist repeating "Women should be in all decision-making spaces," I couldn't help but think – yes, but isn't this something we have been vocal about for several decades at least? How many more need to pass until this is a reality? Are we living a broader inclusion when we focus merely on the representation of particular identity groups, or are we increasing tokenization? Are our identities a guarantee for progressive, feminist, and democratic policies? And when are we going to tire of repeating that women's rights, queer rights, trans rights, migrant rights, people with disability rights – are human rights? And when we get tired, finally – what are we going to change to be more strategic, efficient, and proactive as movements?

To get closer to answering these questions, one concept always comes to mind first: solidarity, the meaning of which is in constant flux. I agree with Sara Ahmed, who says: Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same fights, that our pain is the same pain, or that we hope for the same future. Solidarity implies dedication and work, and the recognition that even though we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we live on the same earth. This often-used word that is constantly in a liminal space, between the world of shabbiness beyond recognition and the world of hope about utopias, for which hardly anyone can blame you for not outgrowing your utopists fantasies. And when it comes to liminal spaces and periods, especially in these times, to me, by default, Gramsci comes to mind, with his famous saying, "The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters," which resonates strongly in this global hour. Yes,

we live the time of monsters, and the new world is yet unborn. In that atmosphere, solidarity persistently fails to slip away, not ending up in the dustbin of history, nor walking on utopian paths. It somehow becomes a self-evident category, which makes it relative and susceptible to our subjectivity. And it's the same challenge with all self-evident categories – we define them by feelings, which can be a deceptive compass, especially when we consider that emotions are not only psychological states, but also social and cultural practices. Perhaps that is why Gramsci asks in his *Prison Notebooks* why fascism appeared in Italy at a time in history when all the conditions for the development of a socialist revolution existed. Sounds familiar?

Recently, in many countries, a debate has ignited about transgender people: what to do with them, which rights they deserve, is there such a thing as too much equality? Of course, there are also a lot of other debates regarding many different groups, comparing them and discussing who deserves peace, resources, human rights, and opportunities, also evident in the current discussion about Palestine, Jews, Ukrainians, and many others. These discussions showcase the instrumentalization of false dichotomies, as well as arbitrary solidarity. Here, as well as in the lively debate on the issue of movements based on the principles and values vs. movements based on identities and victimhood, it is not hard to conclude which one is the winner who takes it all: These discourses provide fertile ground for the rise of (neo)fascist and far-right actors across the globe, evident also in the European elections results.

A couple of weeks ago, after I made the clear connection between anti-democratic and anti-gender actors, advocating they are the same, I was asked by one institutional representative – 'but what if we create the stronger backlash by making these connections? Aren't we better off if we address these issues separately?' I shared my thoughts – that these anti-democratic actors, which include politicians, different religious organizations, think tanks, seemingly grassroots collectives, and in some cases even allegedly women's rights organizations – profit from this fear, because they are aware of the connection and use it to the maximum, while pro-democratic actors do not. In our region, which is the Western Balkan region (as well as many others), women's rights and LGBTIQ rights are usually weaponized to destabilize the region, because the anti-democratic/anti-gender actors have realized very well that these are emotionally charged topics that may be used to destroy democracy. At the same time, they are aware that many who care either don't care about these topics, or they don't understand how they are an integral part of the story of democracy, security, and peace building. This omission is exploited by (in our case) pro-Russian autocratic and other anti-democratic players, to destabilize our countries, endanger peace, empower nationalism using escalation and de-escalation towards potential conflicts, while weaponizing gender.

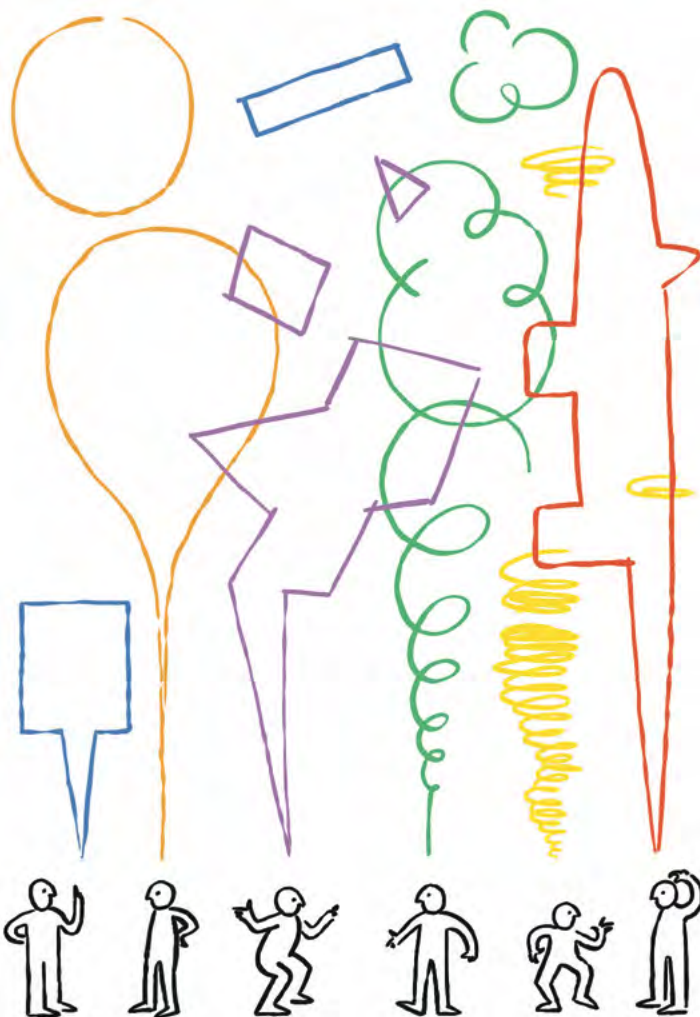
#### **Are we missing the connection of our struggles as the essential part of our holistic view on democracy?**

Furthermore, the decolonial sentiment and perspective is strongly abused to mask the expansion of Russian imperial influence and sub-imperial influence in the region of their main proxy, Serbia. While we, as progressive, strongly pro-democratic movements, self-reflect and consolidate in this collective fear for the preservation and advancement of world peace and democracies, shouldn't we wonder whether we are making the same mistakes by not having onboard all of our people, their knowledge, and their struggles? Are we missing the connection of our struggles as the essential part of our holistic view on democracy? And what and who are we ready to sacrifice to hold onto some sort of privilege and have the illusion of power? The answer to these questions is the answer to the question – what is needed to have peace? Because without peace, which we don't have today, and which is going to be even more absent in the future, if this constellation of things remain in place, everything we have worked for, all the struggles we have and face will fall by the wayside – like a song that may trail off within seconds.

Anti-gender/anti-democratic movements feed off the defeatism of progressive movements. We may have to strengthen our collective reasoning by not just focusing on expediency, but instead on a vision of rebirthing democratic ideals that need to be consistently lived, not just proclaimed. To revive democracy that aims to be true to itself and transformative, that negates and transcends the status quo, infused with experiences of all marginalized and oppressed ones, such democracy needs to be decolonial, anti-fascist, and thus feminist and queer. Solidarity must be political decision.

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Jovan Džoli Ulićević is an activist from Montenegro working on anti-fascism, queer activism, and feminism. He studied Biology at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics at the University of Donja Gorica in Podgorica, where he is currently enrolled for his final year in the program of Diplomacy and International Relations. Džoli heads the organization *Spektra* and the *Trans Network Balkan*. He is a member of the activist circle of the *Guerrilla Foundation*.







▲ The *Theater of the Oppressed* – the audience is an active part of the performance.

“We have to let young people make their own mistakes, or else we will lose them.”

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In 2011, during the Arab Spring, Hosni el Mokhlis became politically involved in the February 20 movement in Morocco – and, subsequently, together with some young people, joined the *Theater of the Oppressed*. A conversation about the power of art, the ability to take criticism, and the need to create spaces for debate.

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**A few years ago you said in an interview that you dreamed of a dignified life in Morocco, of living in a democracy. What has become of this dream today, in June 2024?**

Hosni: The dream is still a dream. In order to say we live in a democracy, we would have to answer in the affirmative to the following questions: “Is there a separation of powers? Are the judiciary and the executive intertwined? Do we have a high level of freedom of expression? We still have a long way to go.

**And to get there, you work for the *Theater of the Oppressed*.**

**Can you tell me what it is, exactly? What kind of work do you do?**

The *Theater of the Oppressed* is a methodology invented by Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal in the 1960s and 1970s, during the dictatorship in Brazil. It is a form of theater that enables audience participation. We call the audience the “spect-actor”: The audience watches, but also takes part in the action. It is a theater that encourages people to think, but also to take action towards change. It raises issues and works with the audience to find solutions and alternatives.

**How exactly do you do that? Do you have a special technique?**

We specialize in what is known as forum theater, which primarily means generating a certain group dynamic. It's not the kind of theater where a director has an idea and then recruits actors to execute it. Rather, the whole group is involved in the process. Forum theater also means that we train and educate. Every year, we offer an open workshop, for instance. People from remote areas of Casablanca come to us for training.

**Paint a picture for us -**

**what are you currently performing?**

We currently have two focal points. One performance has been around for a long time, and we have often done it with the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. It is called *Le conte des nez* (The tale of the noses). It's about accepting others, about migration, and differences. This is perhaps our most famous or best-known performance, which we take on the road all the time. And then, over the last two years, we also addressed violence against women during the Covid pandemic. This show is called *Il n'y a rien à prouver* (There is nothing to prove).

**You were part of the protest movement in Morocco that began on February 20, 2011, so you have been politically active.**

**Was there an experience or key event that made you switch to theater and the arts after one year?**

I've done theater before. Prior to February 20, I spent five years in Barcelona, Spain, where I trained in the *Theater of the Oppressed*. In the year of the protest movement, I was on its communication committee because I speak Arabic, French, and Spanish. After about a year, the demonstrations began to die down, and the numbers of active protesters dwindled compared to the onlookers. We marched through the streets, and people watched us.

**Was it this that made you look for a different path?**

It shocked me at the time, and I thought: “I know the *Theater of the Oppressed*, why not propose it to young people?” They were very motivated to try something new after all the bad experiences. So we started rehearsing in the room where we held the movement's general meetings. After three or four months, we took to the streets and started the work that we continue to this day.

**Now, more than a decade after the events and a decade of theater, has your work made a difference compared to what you experienced in 2011?**

I'd be lying if I said we made a big difference at the macro level. But on a micro level, we achieved a lot. I think we made Moroccan civil society aware of forum theater, or culture in general, as a driver of change, or to develop projects that foster change. Not as the icing on the cake or the final presentation of a project. We try to convey that art and theater can help drive social and political change, and, at the very least, be an outlet for people to voice criticism and form an opinion. I think we have stirred many debates, and we continue to do so.

**Speaking of stirring debates: Can you give me an example, a topic you have launched with the audience at your theater?**

About seven or eight years ago, we held a day about democracy, corruption, and the Moroccan justice system. In our play, there was a judge who was about to pass a verdict, but then he received a phone call – was someone trying to influence him?

This was the moment we engaged the audience. We asked them: "What will the judge do when he takes this call?" A lot of people didn't want to speak, but I'll never forget this one man, whom we called "the neighborhood lunatic." He spoke up, the judge rebuffed him, and he replied: "No! I'm not the problem. You have to find the one who called." Everyone began to applaud. At a micro level, the aim is to raise awareness. That may not seem like much, but it means a lot to us when people realize that there's a collective consciousness, because people are willing to open their eyes, voice criticism, and form an opinion.

**Have you ever considered other kinds of commitment?**

**As a journalist, for example, or in an established or new political party?**

I tried working for a political party, but after a year, I couldn't do it anymore. By the second or third meeting, I knew that this was not my thing, simply because there were so many discussions. My friends know that I often call that "language production." It seemed strange to go from one meeting to the next, from one press release to the next. That wasn't my world, but there are other young people in this movement who have taken this path and are doing well.

**Does theater facilitate things that politics can't – and vice versa?**

From my point of view, politicians make decisions on behalf of others, whereas in this kind of theater, decisions are made collectively. Here, in Morocco, the only time we see our politicians is during election season. They are a bit distant. What theater can do is reduce the distance between the decision-maker and the audience, or even eliminate it altogether, and move on to action. Politicians, even the ones who do listen, are the ones taking action alone on behalf of others. That doesn't mean that politics is bad per se, it also has a role to play at the macro level. It can advocate at an institutional level. It can discuss topics in parliament. It can get things moving in the communities. If you pursue genuine politics, that is.

**In the European elections, many young people voted for far-right parties. How can we get them to debate matters openly, and not just on fragmented social networks?**

There's a difference between truly supporting someone and being the wise or all-knowing man who tells you what to do. We have the feeling that it is still the wise man who is telling us: "This is good for you, and this is not good for you." Moroccan youth are becoming increasingly sensitive to this paternalism. Youngsters have to listen to their parents, their school, their

institutions. If an agent of civil society or change shows up and starts patronizing these kids, they will resist.

**What exactly does good "support" look like?**

You have to let young people dream, trust them, and above all, let them make their own mistakes. That's the way it is in politics: Anyone who governs for a long time, or governs at all, makes mistakes, and those who do nothing are off the hook because they've done nothing. That's dangerous, especially when young people vote that way. We have to create spaces for them. We have to let them make their own mistakes, listen to them, guide them, but not play educator, parent, or teacher - else we will lose them.

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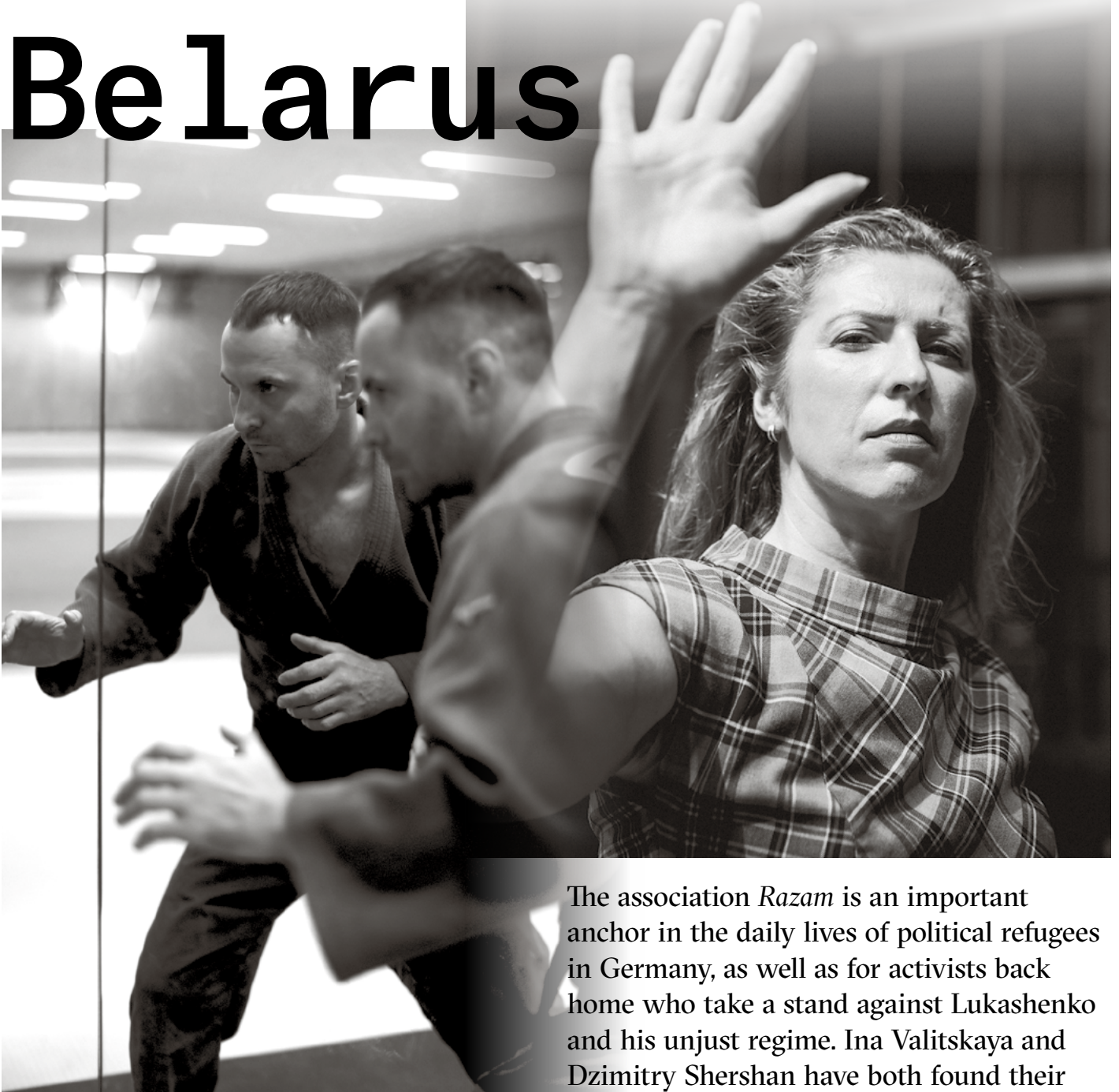
Hosni el Mokhlis is a stage director. He also serves as artistic director of the *Theater of the Oppressed* in Casablanca and of the *Gorara Association for Arts and Cultures*. At the same time, he works as a coach at the *Forum Theater* and acts as a consultant to numerous cultural projects.

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# A balancing act for Belarus



The association *Razam* is an important anchor in the daily lives of political refugees in Germany, as well as for activists back home who take a stand against Lukashenko and his unjust regime. Ina Valitskaya and Dzimitry Shershan have both found their own way to help their compatriots keep up their courage and strength.



By Jens Uthoff

Dzmitry Shershan knows how to fight. As a famous judo martial artist in Belarus, he also knows how to fight fairly. In 2016, he competed in the Olympics; two years later, he won the bronze medal at the European Championships. Today, the 35-year-old lives in Duisburg and works as a coach at the *Judo Club 71 Düsseldorf*. There, in the state capital, he also hosts meetings for the Belarusian exile community in Germany, “where politics and sports come together and we discuss the situation in Belarus.” Shershan has a broad smile and a well-defined biceps that peeks out from under his white muscle shirt.

Facing political persecution in his home country, Shershan fled Belarus and came to Germany in late 2021. Shortly after Belarusian President Lukashenko manipulated the 2020 presidential elections and opposition members were subjected to police brutality on the streets, he joined more than 100 other well-known Belarusian athletes in signing an open letter. “We condemn the falsification of the election results by the President of the Republic of Belarus as well as the use of brutal violence by security forces against citizens engaged in peaceful protest,” the statement read. In 2020, Shershan also participated in protests against Lukashenko, who has been in power for 30 years. “Back then, I took to the streets ten, perhaps fifteen times on the weekends,” he tells us in a Zoom conversation. “We just stood there, wanting to exercise our right to protest. None of the protesters were aggressive. The police chased us, anyway, beating and kicking the participants. It was outrageously unjust.”

Since then, the human rights situation in Belarus has only deteriorated. No less than 1,392 political prisoners are being held by Lukashenko’s regime (as of July 2024), according to figures by Belarusian human rights organization *Viasna*. The organization operates from exile and has been classified as an “extremist” by the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs. Its co-founder, 2022 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, is in prison. So is Viktor Babariko, presidential candidate of 2020, and his supporter and campaign manager Maria Kolesnikova. Their current condition is unknown. The families of democratic activists in Belarus also suffer harassment by the authorities. In late 2023, the writer Sasha Filipenko, a critic of the regime who lives in Switzerland, announced that his father had been arrested in Belarus for his son’s political stance. He was released after 15 days in custody.

Today, Dzmitry Shershan is an active member of *Razam*, the best-known Belarusian exile organization in Germany. The association was founded on August 9, 2020 – the very day Lukashenko manipulated the election results. *Razam* means “together.” The organization counts approximately 300 members and has chapters throughout Germany, in Munich, Bremen, Hamburg, Berlin, and several cities in North Rhine-Westphalia. Among other things, *Razam* is a cultural association that aims to promote Belarusian language and culture, since the country is also subject to increasing Russification. At the end of 2022, there were about 29,000 Belarusians living in Germany, many of them exiles for whom *Razam* is an important anchor in everyday life.

#### **Shershan organizes sports festivals and teaches judo to Belarusian children**

Shershan fights for the persecuted in his home country. Two years ago, he hosted a sports festival in a park in Düsseldorf. He laid out judo mats on the ground to teach his sport to exiled Belarusian children wearing white-red-white flags, the colors of the Belarusian civil rights movement. More than 100 attendees wrote letters to political prisoners in their home country and collected donations for their children. The issue of wrongful imprisonment has become a major topic at *Razam*. “We have a moral obligation to help political prisoners and their families as much as we can,” Dmitry Chigrin, a board member of *Razam*, tells us in a Zoom conversation. According to official figures, Belarus counts more political prisoners per capita than Russia, which has 16 times as many inhabitants (9

▼ Dzmitry Shershan





▲ Ina Valitskaya

million vs. 144 million). Currently, there are 155 political prisoners per one million inhabitants in Belarus, versus six prisoners per one million inhabitants in Russia.

*Razam* also provides specific assistance for the families of political prisoners in Belarus, sending them Christmas packages with school supplies and children's toys. The only way to stay in touch with family and friends is via messaging services. Most opposition members dare not return to their country for fear of being arrested. One of *Razam's* main objectives in Germany is to continuously raise awareness of the situation in Belarus. "Our goal is to support the democratic movement and to be the voice of Belarusians in Germany. We want to keep Belarus on the agenda," says Chigrin, a computer physics expert and lecturer in Theoretical Physics

at RWTH Aachen University. He has been living here since 1998. At *Razam*, he leads a work group to build civil society and democratic networks in Germany and the EU, for a Belarus "that will hopefully soon be free." "It's also important to advocate for Belarusian citizens in Germany and the EU. We also see ourselves as a lobby."

The board deliberately chose to organize as a "registered association" under German law: "It's a very democratic form of organization that aligns very well with our goals, our values, and our mentality," chairwoman Yuliya Salauyova writes. Nevertheless, lobbying on behalf of Belarus is sometimes a balancing act. For many years, there have been public debates as well as legal battles about the extent to which a (non-profit) association is allowed to act politically. However, there is some elbow room for political activism – *Razam's* primary mission, for example, is to monitor compliance with and respect for human

rights. Meanwhile, the public focus on Belarus is waning. Since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, attention has focused entirely on its neighbor Russia. Belarus is considered a co-aggressor in the Russian-Ukrainian war. In addition, the world's gaze is now on Israel and Gaza. What is likely the most draconian state apparatus on European soil has slipped under the radar of media coverage. This is why back in June, *Razam* joined forces with other initiatives to organize an exhibition in the German Bundestag, highlighting the fate of imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bjajazki. At the Paul-Löbe-Haus, the civil rights activist's biography and ten-year prison sentence in Belarus were outlined on displays. His long-time companion at the NGO *Viasna*, human rights lawyer Leanid Sudalenka, came to visit the exhibition. He, too had been temporarily imprisoned and has been living in exile since his release. In his opening speech, he said: "I want to keep reminding everyone that Europe does not end somewhere near Warsaw. Beyond Poland lies a small, quite beautiful country that we want to see become part of a democratic Europe one day."

#### RAZAM ASSOCIATION

The *Razam* association was founded on August 9, 2020, the day Lukashenko manipulated the election results. The organization counts approximately 300 members in chapters throughout Germany, in Munich, Bremen, Hamburg, Berlin, and several cities in North Rhine-Westphalia. At the end of 2022, there were about 29,000 Belarusians living in Germany, many of them exiles.

#### Cultural mediator Ina Valitskaya helps Belarusian exiles obtain new passports

Ina Valitskaya, who hails from Orscha in eastern Belarus, has been living in Munich since 2003. She also serves on the board of *Razam*. For two years, the 43-year-old has organized the festival *Minsk x Minga*, most recently in the fall of 2024 ('Minga' being the local pronunciation for Bavaria's capital Munich). When asked about political activism, she first shrugs it off: "Politics isn't really my thing. But given the political situation in Belarus, I don't understand how anyone can be indifferent to what's happening there. Valitskaya sees herself as a cultural mediator; at *Minsk x Minga*, she organizes concerts, plays, readings, and workshops. To her, cultural festivals are also



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a political space. “Culture is the expression of thought, of the current political situation, and, in the case of Belarus, also of the protest movement.” She is concerned that funding for culture is often the first budget item to be cut. The *Minsk x Minga* festival is co-financed by the Bavarian State Chancellery. Without subsidies, it probably wouldn’t be possible. “Culture is a locomotive,” Valitskaya emphasizes in our video chat. “Societies need culture. Art and culture are very close to the people and their problems.”

At *Razam*, she also provides everyday assistance to exiled Belarusians. For about a year now, Belarusian expats have been unable to renew their passports at embassies abroad, and are required to travel to Belarus to obtain their papers. This is another form of harassment by the regime, intended to force expats to return. “We are working with other organizations to get this problem solved,” says Valitskaya. *Razam* is in touch with the federal government, the federal states, districts, and municipalities because, since the Lukashenko regime enacted this law, many Belarusians have been living in Germany without a valid passport.

Among other things, the *Razam* association provides psychological and medical assistance for victims of police violence.

*Razam* operates mental health support programs for refugees who have been victims of repression. In partnership with other organizations like *Libereco*, the association also provides medical assistance to victims of police violence. There is a special focus on the LGBTQ community, which is criminalized in Belarus. In Hamburg and Berlin, *Razam* hosted events that cater specifically to this community. They also hold memorial events. In several cities, *Razam*

commemorated the “Night of the Executed Poets” of 1937 when, during Stalin’s Great Purge, the Soviet secret service murdered 132 members of Belarus’ intellectual elite in Minsk in a single night, including many writers and poets.

Language is another big issue at *Razam*. Belarus is, in fact, a bilingual country. Even though Belarusian is one of the country’s two official languages, Russian dominates. As Lukashenko seeks proximity to Russia, his language policy is part of a systematic Russification of a country whose citizens expressed a desire to move towards the EU and democracy in 2020. The civic opposition in the country continues to advocate for the Belarusian language, not least to distinguish itself from its Russian neighbor. In Germany, *Razam* organizes events in the Belarusian language, from readings and discussions to film screenings and children’s events. “Perhaps this will encourage more people to speak the language,” says Valitskaya. “I myself also only started speaking it a few years ago.” Dzmitry Shershan is currently recovering from meniscus surgery, which forced him to take a break. Soon, he will start training as a physical therapist in Germany. He is ready to get back to fighting, both on the judo mat and, of course, on behalf of *Razam*.



# The Backbone of Stable Democracies

India's secularism proves that inclusion and equality not only promote social cohesion, but can also stabilize the democratic fabric. What can European democracies learn from this model and why is protecting religious freedom crucial for the future of democratic societies?

By **Neha Dabhade**

Globally, across various regions, there is an observable rise, or in some cases, resurgence, of far-right ideologies. This trend is closely associated with increasing xenophobia and majoritarian sentiments, which have intensified the scrutiny of democratic principles and freedoms, particularly religious freedom and freedom of conscience. Europe, historically celebrated as the cradle of enlightenment and renaissance, is currently grappling with rapid demographic and social transformations due to migration, heightened opposition to migrants, and a notable surge in Islamophobia. This backlash is often perceived as a threat to established cultural norms and worldviews, as exemplified by the controversial ban on headscarves in France, which has sparked a broader debate about the regulation of relations between state and religion.

While India is recognized as a young and dynamic democracy, it does also face increasing issues related to majoritarianism, and some observers think that it is hurtling toward elected autocracy. Nonetheless, the country seems to be regaining its balance. Indian democracy could offer valuable insights into how such tendencies can be counteracted.

Europe does not adhere to a unified model of state-church relations; instead, it exhibits a diverse spectrum across different countries. While some external observers may think that the strict separation of church and state is typical for Europe, the reality is considerably more varied, with different European nations recognizing and privileging some Christian denominations.

In the Nordic countries Norway, Finland, Iceland, Denmark, and Sweden the Evangelical Lutheran Church is both established and endowed with specific privileges by the state. In England, the Anglican Church holds an established status, while Scotland's

Presbyterian Church is similarly recognized. In Greece, the Eastern Orthodox Church dominates religious life. These variations illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of state-church relations across Europe.

In India, the model of secularism arises from the country's inherent diversity and constitutes a foundational element of Indian democracy. Unlike European nation-states, which often evolved around a singular religion and language, India emerged as a nation-state following its independence from the British Empire. India's diversity encompasses a wide array of languages, ethnicities, religions, and castes. The vision of the founders of independent India is enshrined in the constitution and its preamble, reflecting a commitment to a secular democracy where all citizens are afforded equality regardless of language, religion, caste, or ethnicity. This framework underscores the importance of secularism in maintaining the integrity and unity of a diverse nation.

## **A secularism designed to safeguard the freedom of religion for both communities and individuals**

To ensure equality, the Indian state adopted a principle of secularism, which fundamentally differs from the European concept of strict neutrality or separation of state and church. Indian secularism is designed to safeguard the freedom of religion for both communities and individuals. It entails that the state does not endorse any particular religion and maintains equal distance or 'principled distance' from all religions, thereby ensuring that all religions are protected equally. In the absence of a state religion, neither taxes nor public funds can be allocated to promote any specific religion.

Additionally, no religion is to be taught in public schools. Despite this, India's religious denominations are allowed to promote their cultural practices, maintain properties, and conduct processions. However, such processions have occasionally been exploited to incite religious violence against Muslims. Recently, certain universities have imposed bans on the hijab on campus. Moreover, some states are no longer recognizing Muslim educational institutions (known as *madrassas*), potentially leading to their closure. There is also a legislative proposal to impose stricter regulations on *waqf* properties, which are institutions of Islamic law. This is significant as there are efforts to "reclaim" or dispute the status of mosques and *dargahs*, asserting that they were constructed on sites formerly occupied by Hindu temples.





◀ Ganesha Chaturthi is one of the major annual Hindu festivals. It is dedicated to the elephant god Ganesha, who is revered as the deity of new beginnings, wisdom, and prosperity. In some parts of India, especially in cities like Mumbai, Muslims also participate in the celebrations. The festivities are communal events that are meant to spark joy and build connections across religions.

In India, all places of worship are accepted and protected by the state. Moreover, some festivals and religious observances see participation from more than one religion. For example, the Ganesha festival is marked by large public processions that often traverse Muslim-majority areas, with enthusiastic participation from Muslims and, at times, blessings sought from Muslim *dargahs*. Similarly, processions during *Muharram*, one of the four Holy Months of Islam, may seek the blessings of Hindu temples. The routes for these processions are typically determined by *Peace Committees*, local inter-faith groups composed of members from various religions.

Additionally, the Indian model of secularism upholds the right to religious conversion, provided that such conversions are free from coercion, fraud, or inducements. The state also acts against caste discrimination, even though caste remains a component of Hindu identity. Recent state interventions have also included giving women access to certain temples they had been excluded from because of religious traditions.

It is imperative to advance robust democratic values such as pluralism and religious tolerance. Pluralism requires dialog and consultation, which are instrumental for fostering trust and resolving conflicts that threaten coexistence. Persistent stereotypes of minorities in India and migrants in Europe underscore the urgent need to effectively counter disinformation. It is essential to dispell such stereotypes and construct positive narratives of pluralism instead. Also, states need to develop institutions that promote the equitable participation of all citizens and address discriminatory practices.

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Neha Dabhade is the director of the *Centre for Study of Society and Secularism* in Mumbai. She has published numerous articles and reports in magazines and books. Her interests include gender issues, conflicts, peace and conflict resolution, freedom of religion and creed, social harmony, and pluralism. She is a graduate of the *Tata Institute of Social Sciences* in Mumbai.

### **A multiculturalist secularism that tolerates the presence of religious communities and religion in public life**

India is experiencing a rise in Hindu nationalism. This ideology, with its stated goal of establishing a Hindu Nation, is receiving significant patronage from the government. It is associated with institutionalized discrimination against religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians. In the past year, there has been a notable increase in targeted communal riots, mob lynching, hate speech, and hate crimes directed at Muslims and Christians. This surge in violence is facilitated by the systematic erosion of democratic institutions.

The outcome of the 2024 general elections suggests however that Indian democracy is more resilient than previously thought and will be able to restore the balance.

This resilience is due to the long legacy of pluralism, composite culture, and constitutional democracy, which emphasize equality and inclusion. A further important factor is India's model of multi-cultural secularism, which tolerates religious communities and religion in public life.

# The dual nature of protests

By Sergio Rodriguez Prieto

Whether they fight corruption, social inequality, or climate change, around the world social movements have played a key role in driving political change. How can international donor organizations support such movements, while also preventing them from unleashing destructive forces or being co-opted by demagogues?



When future historians will look back at the first two decades of the 21st century they'll be confronted to an undeniable fact - the number of protests has soared and they have become the most common form of mobilization and one of the key drivers of political change. Maybe with hindsight it will be easier to make full sense of such a worldwide pattern that affects both democracies and autocratic regimes despite the different ways they deal with dissent. However, protests have become so ubiquitous and relevant to our understanding of geopolitics that we may not need to wait for future historians because we can already rely on cutting-edge, real-time research.

Using a mix of qualitative and quantitative sources and techniques - from media reports, field observation, case studies, and first-hand accounts, to polls, geospatial information, or large data sets - collected through a growing number of monitoring tools and observatories - researchers are dissecting protests to better understand their internal dynamics and driving forces, the factors that keep them nonviolent, their contribution to democratization, what happens in their aftermath, and the positive or negative impact of foreign support.

This last aspect is especially relevant in the light of the interest shown by the international community, who recognizes the

importance of social movements for democracy, development, and conflict transformation, yet struggles to find legitimate and effective ways to support them. Indeed, legitimacy and effectiveness are the two key variables that determine donors' attitudes towards protests, which seldom happen in a vacuum, and mostly go hand in hand with other forms of mobilization, from civil disobedience to advocacy campaigns, meaning that, to some extent, rallies may be seen as the surf cresting waves that are being propelled by discontent, indignation, and ultimately hope.

## People joining up is a form of power that may tip

Whether it is because of corruption, inequalities, environmental disasters, or climate change, protests are always triggered by acts perceived as intolerable abuses from those in power and therefore represent a last resort to hold them accountable. This may explain why, other than voting or paying taxes, taking to the streets has become one of the most salient forms of political participation, especially among young people and other groups that feel excluded from decision-making. Needless to say, the risks of challenging power differ widely between, on the one hand, democratic systems, however imperfect they may be, and, on the other, dictatorships.

In autocratic systems, individuals will rarely express their views publicly, as they fear reprisals and distrust their fellow citizens.

This is, after all, why the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* recognizes peaceful assembly and association as a key political freedom, although it would be naïve to view it exclusively as a means to rein in power. People coming together is, in itself, a form of power and can therefore unleash both constructive and destructive forces, which is why nonviolence is key to determining if movements are taking a turn towards the darker side. Whenever this happens, we have what Hannah Arendt despised as the mob or Elias Canetti mystified as the crowd, a phenomenon that played a central role in the rise of fascism and has been instrumental for totalitarian regimes.

### **The international community needs to mind the plain political message of a movement**

The protean nature of social movements and protests makes them volatile and hard to predict. Such difficulties, however, do not justify turning a blind eye. No matter how complex a situation, the international community has to be mindful of the political message people are expressing when they gather in dissent. In that sense, foreign support is not only about protecting those who exercise their human rights, but also has to prevent movements from turning violent or from being captured by a demagogue.

I have seen first-hand how donors' reluctance to engage with protests and support nonviolent movements has thwarted their grassroots efforts. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, I witnessed how representatives of civil society were confident that they could rid themselves of an abusive president by taking to the streets - just as they had done with Askar Akayev during the Tulip Revolution in 2005 and with Kurmanbek Bakiyev five years later. However, when prodemocracy activists tried to oust Sooronbay Jeenbekov, alleging he had rigged the 2020 presidential elections, their peaceful protests were hijacked by a violent faction that exploited the power vacuum to storm the prison where Sadyr Japarov, a former MP and nationalist politician, was serving a sentence for allegedly kidnapping a provincial governor. Capitalizing on people's discontent with politicians and thanks to the intimidation tactics of his supporters, Japarov managed to seize power through political manoeuvring. Ever since, what used to be the only democracy in Central Asia, is in steep decline and political freedoms have been dramatically curtailed.

In Armenia, on the other hand, I witnessed quite the opposite, as peaceful protests brought Nikol Pashinyan to power following a long march across the country. At the time leading up to Armenia's Velvet Revolution, I was involved with the EPD (the *European Partnership for Democracy*) as part of a policy dialog on the socioeconomic rights of women and reforms to workplace law. As a result of the upheavals our talks with the ministry had stalled for months. It was worth waiting, however, because once the new government came to office the dialog resumed and the results were promising. Yet, more recently this rosy picture has been overshadowed. Since neighboring Azerbaijan invaded Nagorno Karabakh in 2020 the crisis, along with the dramatic influx of refugees, has brought many Armenians back to the streets, accusing Pashinyan of treason, and these nationalist protests are becoming increasingly ugly and violent.

So what can the international community do about this? Quite a bit, actually... First of all, foreign actors - including transnational civil society organizations and philanthropic donors - must be attentive and try to better understand the dynamics that are driving protests and the motivations of the different factions. Using such

research, the international community will be able to use its diplomatic resources much more effectively, put pressure on those in power (for instance through sanctions) and promote peaceful democratic opposition movements (for example by attending trials or providing visas and legal support).

Donors can make a real difference by training movements regarding questions of organization, negotiations, and nonviolent techniques; or by facilitating exchanges with activists from other countries; or by assisting them in building coalitions and conducting advocacy campaigns. In other words, donors need to understand the power and organizational dynamics behind protests. Only then will they be able to tailor support to the needs of the different actors. By doing this, donors may assist nonviolent movements in becoming more resilient and better able to attain their goals by peaceful means.

Of course this sort of involvement is not devoid of risks. The other option, however, is to do nothing and look on while nonviolent protests are being repressed and degenerate into riots, giving way to yet more bloodshed, another power grab, or democratic backsliding.

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**Sergio Rodriguez Prieto is an expert for government and democracy building with 20 years of experience in Latin America, Eastern Europe, the MENA region, and Central and South Asia. He is a consultant at the *European Partnership for Democracy* and advises *Pax for Peace* and the *Berghof Foundation* on how to develop tools and methods to support non-violent movements and other forms of collective action.**

# “We neither asked, nor did we listen well enough or look closely enough.”

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The German Bundestag has established a parliamentary committee to evaluate mistakes made during Germany's 20-year engagement in Afghanistan. One thing is certain: From the outset, the goals of democracy building were set too optimistically and without regard for the cultural and social realities of the country. But there are also positives.

By **Schahina Gambir**

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For two years members of parliament, academics, and local experts have met in a parliamentary committee named *Lessons from Afghanistan for Germany's future multi-partner programs*. They have identified mistakes that were made during Germany's engagement in the country and have drawn conclusions for future development, security, and foreign policy initiatives.

Today, we know that the goals we set for democracy building were too optimistic from the very outset. We focused exclusively on areas we associate with successful democratization.

From the outset, elections were identified as the sole means for strengthening democratic institutions. This is just one example that illustrates our often culture-blind efforts in Afghanistan. The 2005 parliamentary elections were hailed as a success, but this single-minded focus neglected other key sources of legitimacy for a fledgling democracy, such as freedom of the press, opportunities for building political parties, and fostering wide acceptance of the rule of law.

## The lessons we must now draw can serve as an axiom for future democracy building

“We didn't grasp Afghanistan.” This quote summarizes the parliamentary committee's interim report from February of this year. From the outset, goals were hardly attainable and that did not align with the realities on the ground. Later, these goals were neither reviewed or evaluated across departments, nor were they ever adjusted; this created a path towards dependency. In its interim report, the committee highlighted that a lack of information was clearly the most serious shortcoming during the early phase of Germany's democracy-building efforts. Neither the current situation nor country's social structure were adequately analyzed. In short: We neither asked, nor did we listen well enough or look closely enough. There was no

comprehensive analysis of the ethnic, cultural, religious, and social aspects, nor of the country's social structure or its urban-rural divide – all of which would have been necessary to develop a sound concept for the democratization of Afghanistan.

There was a lack of diversity in our selection of the Afghan actors we involved in our decision-making. In particular, we over-emphasized the importance of the Afghan diaspora, which significantly restricted our view of the current situation in the country. Large parts of Afghan civil society, especially the interests of Afghan women, were not adequately considered, and often even blatantly neglected.

Civil society was defined almost exclusively through NGOs, while in Afghanistan, especially in rural areas, “traditional civil society” actually exists in formats such as councils of elders, shuras, jirgas, and mosques. However, since collaboration was mainly limited to NGOs, it failed to reach rural populations in the south, which massively exacerbated distribution conflicts in the country. When distributing financial resources, NGOs often primarily followed a clientelistic approach.

However, it would also be wrong to dismiss these shortcomings of democracy-building as “Western arrogance” or sheer misjudgments. On the one hand, there were some encouraging democratic developments, such as logistical support in national elections and fostering media diversity. On the other hand, the lessons we must now draw can serve as axioms for foreign policy in general, and for international democracy building in particular.

Promoting democracy abroad is not a short-term project. It requires diligent planning, taking into account the local social fabric, the affected population, and their value systems. It must also be funded for the long term. Promoting democracy requires flexibility. It must be adaptable, open to criticism, and always pursue an inclusive approach that involves all social groups, rather than an exclusive top-down approach that creates new conflicts or exacerbates existing ones.

This is the only sustainable way to help establish stable political systems that meet the challenges of the 21st century and do justice to the universal aspirations of human rights, equality, justice, and political participation. Only when we listen, reflect, and regularly challenge our own practices can we offer a helping hand and support the difficult, long path towards sustainable democracy building.

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Schahina Gambir is a member of the Bundestag for *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* and chairwoman of the parliamentary committee *Lessons from Afghanistan for Germany's future multi-partner programs*. She is a regular member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Committee for Family, Seniors, Women and Youth, and a deputy member of the Committee for Internal Affairs and Community.



# “We really need to think more creatively about politics”

Interview by Zora Siebert  
and Rasmus Randig

**From your point of view, what impact will a stronger far right have on relations within the EU - and also in terms of foreign policy?**

Rosa Balfour: First of all, we need to be very clear about what we're talking about. In the media, the terms populism, right-wing populism, radical right, and populist right are used interchangeably. In the past 15 years, there has been a lot of talk about populism, and European politics have indeed seen populism rise. In fact, there's been a long wave from the 1980s onwards. But today, the challenge comes from political parties of the radical right, by which I mean parties belonging to the far right, which are democratic but illiberal. They have done very well in the elections to the European Parliament, and taken together, they make up a quarter of the vote. However, they continue to be split into different groups. It remains to be seen how influential they will actually be.

**Considering the European Parliament, but also possible majorities in the European Council ...**

... today there are eight governments in the European Council that include the radical right, be it leading a coalition, supporting a coalition or a government, or as the party in charge, like in Hungary. In a few days [with the new government in the Netherlands], it could potentially be nine, meaning a quarter of the European Council. This makes a difference, and it means that the radical right can form a blocking minority. It means there is a potential for the radical right to shape European politics in an unprecedented way. We haven't seen it so far because they are divided, but the situation could change.

**In which direction could EU foreign policy be headed in this scenario?**

There are a few things these parties agree on. They're all nationalist, they're all anti-immigration, and they're all deeply Euro-sceptic. The combination of the three can mean that anti-immigration policies will continue: fortifying the external border, deterring immigration, and pursuing morally dubious deals with third countries, even if they are authoritarian. Nobody is shocked about it anymore because it's been happening for ten years, and it will likely continue.

**How do you explain the rise of the extreme right?**

There is a proliferation of explanations in the media. We can group dominant narratives into two wider categories. One is the economic argument about globalization, how it has brought about increasing inequality, the “left behind,” and the transformation of social classes. The other big narrative is about culture and identity, the fear of immigration, the fear that immigration is destroying our cultures, such as the “Great Replacement” theory. These are big meta explanations.

Yet, if you look at the map to see where populism and the radical right have been on the rise, there's no necessary empirical correlation between these explanations and what is happening on the ground. In other words, these explanations are not backed by empirical research. Populism grew in affluent countries, such as in Scandinavia, and in places where immigration is not an issue, such as Hungary. These explanations do not shed sufficient light on why today our democracies are challenged by the rise of the radical right.



▲ Rosa Balfour

Rosa Balfour, Director of Carnegie Europe, attributes the rise of the far right not only to wider developments, such as globalization and disinformation and their consequences, but also to a far more “mundane” cause: the dysfunctional relationship between citizens and the institutions of representative democracy. This is why she advocates for remedial action not only at the international and European level, but also, and primarily, at the national and local levels.

**Which developments are important to understand the rise of the radical right?**

We should look at the 1980s as the starting point of a gradual erosion of our democratic systems. Among the many developments, political parties became less representative of their traditional bases, their membership started to shrink, eventually leading to a gap between political elites and the electorates, real or perceived.

At a macro level, governance has been transformed by globalization and European integration. Some powers and decision-making bodies have shifted to international organizations and entities - and thus away from the national and local levels.

**Does that also mean that there has been a lack of representation of citizens in governance?**

Exactly. To give you an example, the *Fratelli d'Italia*, a post-fascist party with deep roots in fascism, has widened its electorate, growing its share of the vote from 6 % to more than 20 %. It's not that everybody who has voted for them has suddenly decided that they like the fascist ideology. People in Italy were dissatisfied with all the other political parties and voted for change.

**So we need to identify democracy entry points at the local level?**

Yes. But let's be clear. There is a disillusionment with democracy, but there are also examples of civic activism. Politics has failed to link up with these new examples of civic activism. I do think that beyond the big trends, such as globalization or perceptions of identity under threat, we have a far more mundane difficulty in the relationship between citizens and the institutions of representative democracy. We really need to think more creatively about multi-level democracy, how decisions are taken at the local, regional, state, and the European levels, as well as at the international level. To give just one example: Because of the rise of the radical right, the EU has been pursuing defensive migration policies. But often, the problems with immigration are tied to the local provision of services, such as education and housing. These are best dealt with at the local level, not by paying third countries to patrol our borders. There is a disconnect between the nature of the challenge and the governance solutions to address it.

**You argue that the long-term erosion of democracy is the cause of the rise of far right parties. But these parties also challenge democracy, don't they?**

Once in power, these parties are more confident than in the past, and they try to undermine democratic institutions and practices. Secondly, they are paying far more attention to cultural issues. If you look at the policies of these parties, when they get into government, be it local government or national government, they really are working hard on the politics of culture, identity, memory, and history. They want to tell a different story. Often, it's a story of victimhood, to which many people can relate emotionally. They are crafting a narrative that presents an alternative to what they consider to be a narrative that has been decreed by liberal, cosmopolitan elites. This is why culture has become a battleground for the radical right.

**Finally, these parties are getting better at linking up internationally.**

Exactly. There is a "radical right international," and it's not just in Europe. They have connections, obviously, with Russia, but also with other actors. Traditionally, because of their nationalism, these parties have been overwhelmingly focused on domestic issues. Now they are expanding their international connections, learning from each other's experiences, and developing foreign policy positions. This is new.

**What mistakes has liberal democracy been making in handling these groups?**

We definitely should not label people voting for the radical right as ignorant people! We must rather question ourselves and our assumptions and not assume that this is all about protest votes. Look at France, where one third of the French people vote for *Rassemblement National*, which is a very deeply illiberal party with a strong authoritarian streak. We need to understand that one third of the French people think a soft form of authoritarianism is okay. This cannot be dismissed as protest politics. Dismissing it has not prevented the growth of these parties. A lot of mistakes have been made by liberal democracy in handling the rise of the radical right.

**Why do you argue that democracy is important to foreign policy? Realists would say that security is more important than democracy?**

Having looked at both security and democracy for a long time, I have observed that there are two communities of expertise and not enough linkages between them. If you talk about democracy in the foreign policy community, you are considered a wishy-washy liberal talking about minor details. The world is all about

«There is a disillusionment with democracy, but there are also examples of civic activism. Politics has failed to link up with these new examples of civic activism.»



geopolitics, realpolitik, security, hard interests. Then you go to the other community that is active on democracy issues and talk about security, and there you are seen as a conservative. My take on this is: If democracy fails inside the European Union, it's going to have consequences on foreign policy.

**Can you give us an example?**

For instance, Orbán has been undermining the decision-making process in the European Union on Ukraine and on defense. Hungary has been systematically sabotaging EU foreign policy with respect to some key interests: By supporting Ukraine's defense against Russia's aggression, the EU is actually relying on Ukraine for its own security. It is not a wishy-washy liberal position to state that Hungary has increasingly been the Trojan Horse of Russia and China inside the European Union. That's very real politics. And why is Orbán doing it? It's because he has degraded his country's democracy. And in order to maintain his power at home and his leverage in the European Union, he needs to pursue nationalistic anti-EU politics. Otherwise, he could be ousted or isolated in some way or another. Orbán now is betting on having more like-minded countries sitting at the table in the European Council. Recent electoral results have strengthened the number of radical right governments in Europe. Orbán is also hoping that Donald Trump will win the elections in the United States in November.

**In a democracy, civil society plays a big part, both within the European Union and in countries that are candidates for accession. Where do you see the biggest challenges in supporting them?**

The first is that authoritarian actors have increased their game in disrupting democracies elsewhere. They are increasingly using digital tools to do that. The EU must take measures to protect and defend democracy from external interference. Civil society plays a fundamental role in transforming the candidate countries into vibrant democracies fit to join the EU. But over the past few years, EU leaders have not offered enough support to the forces committed to political reform in these countries. If the next round of enlargement is driven by geopolitics rather than by democratic change, this will be to the detriment of the EU as a whole.

Paying lip service to key values, such as multilateralism, a rules-based order, international institutions, human rights, and democracy is not enough. The EU needs to support civil society more effectively through its various programs.

**Isn't it also ultimately a financial question?**

Ultimately, the EU needs to bring the candidate countries into the digital and Green transformation of the economy that it is pursuing for itself. Imagining a large-scale renewal of the European continent and its economic model ought to frame the way in which EU enlargement is pursued. It's in the interest of the EU that the countries joining it are law-abiding democracies capable of sharing the political and economic model that has been successful for decades.

**How do you think the EU can strike a balance between the need for transparency and protection against unlawful external interference while maintaining an independent and critical civil society?**

Authoritarian countries have certainly upped their game in disrupting democracies through interference. There certainly is a need to be more alert, especially in the information space and with respect to the emerging political actors on the radical right. Russia and the political party *United Russia*, for instance, have

been financially supporting far-right parties in Europe. There is a need to strengthen and sharpen EU tools, but I think there are a couple of bigger conceptual points to be made.

The issue of disinformation is not just about malign interference and people believing fake news. The media business model has been in crisis for many years; its problems that stem from technological change have created the space for disinformation. The business model of media, its financing, the need to invest in fact-checking, and to support educational approaches that encourage youth to be discerning all need to be addressed.

We need to understand that disinformation is not just something that comes from the outside. It is within our societies. We must come to terms with the fact that anti-Semitism is accepted in many quarters, islamophobia is spreading, and this, too, plays a part in poisoning the information ecosystem.

My final point is reiterating what I said earlier. It's not just about what the EU can do. National politics and local politics also need to play a greater role.

\* The interview was conducted in early July.

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Rosa Balfour is the director of *Carnegie Europe*. Her areas of expertise include European politics, institutions, as well as foreign and security policy. Her current research focuses on the relationship between domestic political developments and Europe's global role.

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By David Muschenich

With their cheerful music, *Banda Comunale* has been getting under the skin of Neo-Nazis in Saxony for over 20 years. Most recently, the brass band has played mostly in support of democratic alliances in rural areas of Saxony. Can they make a difference?

# Giving right-wingers an earful

A street in Altenburg resonates with the rich tones of a tuba playing to the rhythm of a drum. A trumpet and a trombone join in as the protest slowly moves through the old town that is south of Leipzig. It is Sunday, January 28. About two weeks earlier, the research network *Correctiv* broke the news of a secret meeting of AfD representatives with right-wing extremists in Potsdam. Their common agenda: deport as many people as possible. In response, more than one million people across Germany protested against these right-wing remigration fantasies.

In many small towns in East Germany, the brass band *Banda Comunale* is part of the crowd. Their approximately 20 members grew up in Brazil, Scotland, Syria, Poland, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Russia, Palestine, Dresden, and Bavaria. Today, they all live in Germany. For years, they have been touring rural areas of Saxony to support anti-right-wing protests. In addition to the protest in Altenburg, their busy schedule for the first part of the year included gigs in Meißen, Dippoldiswalde, Waldheim, Bautzen, Rochlitz, Freiberg, Flöha, Zittau, and Dresden. Can this actually help boost the commitment for democracy?

Michał Tomaszewski plays the clarinet. He laughs a lot. A sticker on his instrument reads: "Good Night White Pride." His family fled from Poland to West Germany in 1989.

Nine years later, he moved to Dresden. He has been with the band from the beginning and is in charge of online bookings. When the band was founded in 2001, he says, its members wanted to take a stand against Neo-Nazis. Back then, thousands of Nazis would come to the city for a "mourning march" to mark the anniversary of the Allied bombing of Dresden. "Mobile music is simply a different animal than playing on a stage with amplifiers," Tomaszewski says. In Dippoldiswalde, we get to observe what he means by that.

It's raining on this first Sunday in February in the small town in Saxony. Braving the weather, *Banda Comunale* is playing on the market square by the Lion's Fountain in front of about 800 protesters. They have colorful umbrellas and hoodies pulled down over their foreheads. A rain-soaked banner reads "SOE (Sächsische Schweiz-Osterzgebirge) against right-wing agitation". The crowd claps and jumps to the beat of the big drum. Michał Tomaszewski smiles as he tucks his clarinet under his left arm. He starts gesturing with both hands, inviting everyone to dance. He resumes playing his instrument, spinning around to the music in his yellow jacket.

*Banda Comunale* has become more than a mere street band. On a Friday in early July, they have a gig at the Chancellery in Berlin to mark the 26th anniversary of the office

of Federal Commissioner for Culture and Media. *Banda* is the final act on the program.

As they wait for their turn, meeting room SL 1.41 in the Chancellery serves as their backstage area. There's lemonade and snacks on a conference table. Four musicians are sitting at the rear end of the table: Gregor Littke – trombone, Geremi Riess – trumpet, Arne Müller – drums, and Ronaldo Santos da Silva – guitar.

Their instruments are sitting on the dark stone floor by the north staircase of the Chancellery. It will be another seven hours until their performance. The four of them are here early for the soundcheck; the rest of the crew will join them later. They are wearing baggy T-shirts, dress shirts, jeans, and sneakers. They are joking and chatting about past gigs. They have been with the band for varying periods of time. Arne Müller has been a member since 2008, Ronaldo Santos da Silva joined only this year.

**Playing music right in the middle of a crowd is an instant mood lifter**

They have time to tell us a little about their band. As with any ensemble, long-standing members sometimes leave as new people join. When they find themselves short of a certain instrument, they ask around to find a replacement. For instance, when their former guitarist dropped out because of time





◀ *Banda Komunale* helps citizens to reclaim public spaces.

### Will the hostility and threats stop them? Never.

And how does the other side react to the band? Germi Riess takes an imaginary phone out of his pocket. One common occurrence at almost every performance, he says, is that people wave their cell phone cameras in their faces, taking pictures of them. His bandmates nod in confirmation. One time, he directly confronted one of these avid photographers: “Well, did you take a nice photo?” And the response was: “The time will come when we pull out the lists, and then you’re toast.”

So, should they stop? Never. So far, nothing bad has happened to them. New member Ronaldo Santos da Silva says that sometimes, he does get a bit tense. Around Mayday in Chemnitz, when *Banda Komunale* tried to drown out a speech by AfD politician Maximilian Krah, Littke stood directly in front of a “No Place for Nazis” banner, blowing his trombone with all his might, while Santos with his guitar kept more to the background. About 30 Neo-Nazis had gathered on the other side. Santos kept a watchful eye on them. “If they had made a run, I would have been ready.” Littke was less concerned: “The police stood in-between us the whole time.” Santos da Silva nods. “Yes, but it was my first time.”

When the band started out 20 years ago, they did two or three street gigs a year. “We really only became politicized in late 2014 because of *Pegida*,” founding member Tomaszewski says. A decade ago, the right-wing movement *Pegida* began holding weekly rallies in Dresden. That’s when they started playing at the counter-protests, opposing racism with cheerful music. But a few months later, when hatred erupted into violence against refugees in Freital, a town ten kilometers south of Dresden, they knew it was not enough. Every day, around 100 people gathered in front of a refugee hostel at Hotel Leonardo, protesting under the slogan “No to the refugees’ shelter” and throwing bottles, firecrackers, and rocks. The band packed their instruments and got on a train to Freital in order to give a warm musical welcome to the refugees at the facility. As a result, the band recruited some new members from among the refugees.

After Freital, the band visited other refugee shelters, offering the residents

constraints, they approached Ronaldo Santos da Silva. Germi Riess joined nine years ago. Every band member is also involved in other projects or works a day job. But seriously: Does music really work as a remedy against the AfD?

Of course, *Banda Komunale* has no empirical data to explain why and how exactly they have such a strong effect on people, but they all know from their own experience that the recent crises - the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and inflation - have had a debilitating effect on many people. When more than a million protesters took to the streets across Germany at the beginning of the year, it sparked a sense of community. In January, a study published by the Cologne-based *rheingold Institute* suggested that most of the protesters felt that they can make a difference. Other studies show, both playing and listening to music creates a sense of community. A live performance evokes even stronger emotional reactions - and that is precisely what *Banda Komunale* does at the protests.

Germi Riess has observed the effects of these emotional reactions. For years, AfD supporters dominated the market squares simply because “they were the loudest,” waving flags and engaging in hate speech from oversized stages. “But now people organize to take back their market squares.” And when *Banda Komunale* is there, in the

middle of the crowd, making loud, cheerful music, “something changes.”

Trombonist Gregor Littke also reminisces. He speaks slowly, reliving past performances, such as a gig in Waldheim. In late May, when the band played at the Obermarkt, politically active residents in this small town in Central Saxony set up a few beer tables with ceramic plates, potato salad, apple juice, and rainbow flags on the cobblestone market square. There was the historical Wettinbrunnen, a fountain surrounded by five young trees, “it was simply a beautiful place.”

Meanwhile, a right-wing counter protest was brewing on the other side of the Obermarkt. People were brandishing blue AfD flags as well as several green-white flags, the banners of the “Free Saxons.” Even today, Littke can still sense their miserable mood, in stark contrast to the cheerful spirit of those who had come to listen to the band. “It’s obvious that music injects energy into the situation.” Afterwards, several people sent messages to the band, thanking them for their performance. “Please keep doing what you’re doing,” one of them read. Another said: “You all are veeeeery important!”



some reprieve from uncertainty and fear with their clarinets and trombones. Some refugees took out their own instruments, enriching the band's brass sounds with an oud, a short-necked lute, and a riq, a single-skinned drum with jingles. Eastern European Klezmer and Arabic folk music merged into one soundscape.

### Breaking stereotypes with workshops on intercultural music

For about seven years, the brass band has been taking its new repertoire to schools in Saxony. They have held over a hundred workshops on intercultural music in cooperation with local integration councils. At one of these workshops at an elementary school in Limbach-Oberfrohna at the beginning of this year, the band made a video. It shows children sitting on a wooden floor in a classroom, drumming a beat on orange plastic buckets. In another room, cellist Akram Younus Ramadhan Al-Siraj plays with a dozen children. He has them standing in a circle, jumping back and forth to a fast beat, spinning around and throwing their arms in the air. After this icebreaker activity, Al-Siraj tells the children of his escape from Iraq. The band has found this to be an effective way to dismantle clichés. The abstract notion of a refugee becomes a real-life person, future doctors, future teachers, and above all, people who love and make music.

How sustainable is the effect of music in the provinces? Don't people fall back into their old patterns once *Banda Comunale* returns to Dresden? Christian Schäfer from *tvBUNT*, the network for democracy and diversity in the Bautzen district, has an answer to this question. He co-hosted several "Happy Monday" events that were held this year at the city's four traditional markets, all featuring musical performances, readings, mindfulness trainings, and street dancing. About 50 clubs, institutions, and initiatives from Bautzen participated to spread the positive vibes. *Banda's* music dispels fears, Schäfer says. It motivates others to step up their involvement.

On February 25, almost 2,000 people demonstrated in Bautzen under the slogan "Colorful Brass Music Against Right-Wing Extremism." Led by *Banda Comunale's* upbeat tunes, people danced through the city, undaunted by the right-wingers who were gathered at Kornmarkt, trying to provoke them. The protest, scheduled for two hours, lasted for three, and the band never missed a beat. "Some people fed off these good vibes for months," Schäfer recalls.

This is important, especially during the dark winter months, when the situation in Bautzen is "scary," as Schäfer puts it. The weekly right-wing rallies draw several thousands each Monday. Far-right extremists take the stages, yelling their conspiracy theories, and kids as young as 13 with Nazi-style hairdos line up in the so-called 'youth block' behind a banner reading "We are the youth without migration background." Many are dressed in black. Their strategy is simple, but effective: They usurp the public space.

*Banda Comunale* counters it by taking this space back. This is how Schäfer sees it, and band members like Michał Tomaszewski have had the same experience. Instead of engaging or trying to argue with right-wing conspiracy narratives, the band members from Iraq, Brazil, Dresden, and elsewhere happily bounce along with Eastern European music. When Michał Tomaszewski talks to a punk kid after a performance, it's not unusual that an elderly woman will join their conversation. These kinds of encounters happen a lot, a powerful testimony to the unifying power of music. Politics cannot replace that. "And even if the AfD were to become the governing party, we would all keep doing our thing." And that is why the band is in the AfD's crosshairs as one of their top 20 targets.

Recently, the party expressed outrage that this "ultra-leftist band" received grants worth one million euros from the Free State of Saxony. Clarinet player Tomaszewski thinks that's funny. First off, the money was granted over a period of six years and used exclusively for school projects. And besides, "the AfD is complaining about something that could not be more quintessentially German: a brass band," he laughs. They use donations, prize money, or occasional fees for performances to finance their trips to the countryside. Most of the time, they play for free.

But what about their future activities in Saxony? Arne Müller plays with his drumsticks as he considers his answer. "Depends on the young people, on how many of them will make an effort, how many will not let themselves be driven away," he says, rhythmically clacking the sticks together.

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David Muschenich reports for the daily newspaper *die tageszeitung (taz)* from the states of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia. He studied Journalism at the University of Leipzig as well as Social and Economic Sciences at the University of Erfurt.



▲ Together against the Right - in February *Banda Comunale* marched through the streets of Dippoldiswalde.

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## Elections

### Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar: Authoritarian elections

Autocracies also hold elections, yet they are not meant to empower the people. This dossier addresses this specific form of maintaining power. [boell.de/en/authoritarian-elections-southeast-asia](https://www.boell.de/en/authoritarian-elections-southeast-asia)

### Simbabwe: #TheElectionsWeWant

In the dossier #TheElectionsWeWant, created by our Cape Town office, voices from Zimbabwean civil society discuss the election in Zimbabwe, the EU's election observation mission, and deficiencies in the electoral process. <https://za.boell.org/en/elections-we-want>

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## Dialog and Debate

### European Democracy Conference

Held every two years in Berlin, the European Democracy Conference gives a forum to a plurality of voices on issues of European democracy. Its objective is to stimulate conversations and participation for the future of a democratic Europe. [boell.de/en/european-democracy-conference](https://www.boell.de/en/european-democracy-conference)

### Brazil: Dialogs for Democracy

In 2023, our feminist partner organization *CFEMEA* invited activists and organizations to the National Congress for its "Dialogs for Democracy: Strengthening the fight for human rights." The event facilitated exchanges with members of the 'Feminist, Anti-racist Parliamentary Front,' a cross-party alliance of progressive federal representatives. [cfemea.org.br/](https://cfemea.org.br/)

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## Peace

### Ukraine: 20 Recommendations for a Gender-Sensitive Reconstruction

This study addresses pressing gender-political challenges for local communities and administrations for the reconstruction in Ukraine. It offers recommendations for six areas of action: Governance, budgeting, security, social security, mobility, and leisure. <https://www.boell.de/de/2024/06/03/gender-sensitive-recovery-and-development-local-level>

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## Environment

### Chile: A Guide for Advocacy Work on Environmental Issues

Our partner organization *Fundación Ecosur* developed a guide for advocacy work on environmental issues. Aimed at communities, the guide was distributed to local officials, students, and researchers at numerous workshops and seminars. [cl.boell.org/es/2022/11/17/guia-incidencia-politica-desde-la-sociedad-civil-en-tematicas-ambientales](https://www.cl.boell.org/es/2022/11/17/guia-incidencia-politica-desde-la-sociedad-civil-en-tematicas-ambientales)

### Georgia: Mining and Local Political Participation

Mining is an important economic sector in Georgia. Human rights violations and severe environmental damage are commonplace. In partnership with the *Social Justice Center Tbilisi*, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung supports initiatives that educate affected communities about processes of legally mandated participation and teaches them how to get involved. [https://socialjustice.org.ge/uploads/products/pdf/Participation\\_of\\_local\\_community\\_1675159232.pdf](https://socialjustice.org.ge/uploads/products/pdf/Participation_of_local_community_1675159232.pdf)

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## Human rights

### Greece: "In Defence of Defenders"

In Europe, people who support refugees are increasingly being criminalized. Our publication "In Defence of Defenders," authored by the *Border Violence Monitoring Network* (BVMMN), is a practical guide for supporting human rights defenders, offering practical solutions to the increasing attacks they are facing. [gr.boell.org/en/2023/02/23/defence-defenders](https://www.gr.boell.org/en/2023/02/23/defence-defenders)

### Palestine: Youth for Human Rights

"Palestinian Youth Advocates for Human Rights" is a project by the Bethlehem-based *Balasan Initiative for Human Rights*. In a program that spans several months, a partner organization of our Ramallah Office empowers Palestinian youth to improve their social and political participation.

### Tunisia: Fundamental Rights and Individual Freedoms Under the New Constitution

In September 2023, one year after the new Tunisian constitution came into force, the *Tunisian Association for the Defense of Individual Liberties* published a report on the situation of fundamental rights and individual freedoms in Tunisia with the support of our Tunis Office. <https://adlitn.org/en/une-annee-de-la-republique-dun-seul/>





▲ Sayed Shoaib Sadaat

# The final word

By Sayed Shoaib Sadaat

The current situation in Afghanistan presents significant challenges for civil society, with activists like myself often operating under difficult conditions. Despite these challenges, the resilience of Afghan civil society remains a beacon of hope.

However, our efforts can only go so far without international support, especially from Europe. European nations must use their diplomatic channels to advocate for human rights and environmental protection in Afghanistan. Continued international engagement is essential to ensure a supportive environment for civil society and its activists.

We also urgently need increased funding for educational initiatives. Education and exchange programs, particularly in fields such as human rights, environmental science, and governance, are transformative. Scholarship programs can cultivate a new generation of Afghan leaders equipped to bring about meaningful change. However, the current requirements for Afghan applicants are very strict. Easing these requirements would make such opportunities more accessible to a greater number of people.

On the other hand, we need financial support for projects on environmental sustainability. Afghanistan is one of the countries most vulnerable, yet least prepared to adapt to climate change. European policymakers engaging directly with local NGOs could bring

tailored support to the specific needs of Afghan communities in a highly effective and targeted manner. One way to do this is to create platforms for Afghan activists to partner directly with European policymakers. Engaging in discussions, such as the EU roundtable on Climate Change in Afghanistan in 2023, has shown the value of these exchanges with civil society organizations and NGOs.

European policy can play a critical role in supporting Afghan civil society by providing resources and educational opportunities, ideally with a focus on environmental protection. Addressing these challenges can lead to improved health, economic stability, and overall well-being, creating a more stable, sustainable, and more resilient society.

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Sayed Shoaib Sadaat, an environmental activist from Afghanistan, is dedicated to promoting sustainable practices and climate awareness. He holds a degree in agriculture from Kabul University and an MBA from the American University of Afghanistan. Sadaat's work includes leading climate education programs, enhancing community livelihoods, and advocating for stronger environmental policies, making him a vital voice for change in Afghanistan.



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“Without dedication and action, there can be no democracy.  
And without democracy, everything is for naught.”

Böll.Thema 24–2

Democracy

Diverse avenues towards one common goal

Fostering democracy and upholding human rights, taking action to prevent the destruction of the global ecosystem, advancing equality between women and men, securing peace through conflict prevention in crisis zones, and defending the freedom of individuals against excessive state and economic power – these are the objectives that inspire the ideas and actions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. We maintain close ties to the German Green Party (Alliance 90 / The Greens) and, as a think tank for green visions and projects, we are part of an international network encompassing partner projects in approximately 60 countries. The Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung works independently and

nurtures a spirit of intellectual openness. We currently maintain a worldwide network with 37 international offices. We cooperate closely with the Böll foundations in Germany’s federal states, and we support talented, socio-politically engaged undergraduate and graduate students in Germany and abroad. We gladly follow Heinrich Böll’s exhortation for citizens to get involved in politics, and we want to inspire others to do the same.

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