

## Geneva Democracy Dialogue Summary Report

23 May 2024

The Geneva Democracy Dialogues are designed to facilitate open, inclusive, and informed discussions on challenges for democracy, foster collaboration and innovation, and generate actionable recommendations. They are a part of wider programme of Caux Initiatives of Change Foundation on Revitalising Democracy Across Europe and the Wider World.

The first edition of the Geneva Democracy Dialogue was organised by **Caux Initiatives of Change Foundation**, with the support of the **European Union Delegation**, and in partnership with the **Kofi Annan Foundation** on the theme: **How can Narratives help Revitalise Democracy in Europe?**

This 2-hour Dialogue held with 50 participants from diplomatic missions, civil society and international organizations, under the Chatham House Rule, sought to increase understanding of the power of narratives on democracy.

The following summarizes the key discussion points.

### Narratives and Their Power

“Narratives are more than just stories”: narratives are threads that weave together our collective history and can enhance civic engagement and inspire action, serving as potent weapons to counteract harmful actions and promote inclusivity, however they also have the potential to be very harmful.

### Take a look in the mirror: Change starts from within

Democracy is a never-ending process. We need to first look at ourselves at an individual level and at a country level to see how we are living democratic values. Are we emanating the change we wish to see? Defending democratic values authentically in Europe today is challenging and major concerns were expressed, particularly in the face of the war on Ukraine, the war in Israel and Gaza and the consequences. We should focus on ourselves and not just naming and shaming others. We can pretend that someone else is the stumbling block, but could that someone be me? Personal change can inspire, lead, and create the conditions necessary for broader transformation, highlighting the interconnectedness of personal and societal evolution.

### Trust: We need to be able to have open discussions about tough issues

Narratives that highlight the importance of open dialogue, debate, and deliberation in a healthy democracy can encourage citizens to engage in respectful discussions about political and social issues. Stories that emphasize common goals and shared humanity can help bridge ideological and cultural divides, fostering a more cooperative and less polarized political environment.

### Reinforce democratic values and principles, and not just voting

Democracy is not a given in the EU or elsewhere. While voting is a fundamental aspect of democracy, we must look at the values that underpin democracies: tolerance, moderation, and dialogue. A holistic approach to democracy involves fostering informed, engaged, and empowered citizens who can participate in and shape their governance in meaningful ways. Perhaps there has been too much focus on the package of “democracy, human rights, and free markets” at the detriment of the values that need to underpin a democratic society. Narratives that recount historical struggles for democracy, human rights, and freedom can remind citizens of the importance of protecting these values and the sacrifices made to achieve them. Narratives can showcase how democratic values are being upheld and advanced and can reinforce their relevance and importance in daily life.

### “Battle” of the narratives

Democracies face many challenges from within, as well as from external threats like disinformation, which attacks our policies and undermines democratic processes. The prevailing narratives around authoritarian regimes are: that they are just as good at delivering security as democracies, the spread of democracy threatens national sovereignty, and if you are pro-democratic, you are a “Western proxy”.

It was explained that this misinformation seeks to turn the strengths of democracy into weaknesses. With the rise of online information aiding authoritarian regimes, regulating social media is increasingly important. The power of younger generations to affect change based on inclusive democratic leadership values was also raised as an important consideration.

The framing of democracy versus authoritarian regimes was discussed as potentially unhelpful, given democracies' imperfect track record on human rights, dignity, and the rule of law. The public's distrust of political institutions, fueled by double standards and the erosion of the rule-based order, was recognized as a significant challenge. To restore trust and credibility, the focus must be on truth, the implementation of public policy, combatting disinformation, and education.

Participants recalled that defending democratic values with authenticity involves a genuine commitment to the principles and practices that underpin democracy.

### Community and civic engagement

Encourage local communities to share their own stories and experiences, creating a grassroots narrative that reflects the diverse realities of citizens. Narratives that emphasize the power of individual and collective action in shaping the future of Europe can inspire citizens to participate more actively in democratic processes, such as joining civic organizations, engaging in public debates and, in addition, voting.

### Need to do more to protect the health of our information ecosystem

Narratives that educate citizens about the importance of critical thinking and media literacy can help navigate the complex information landscape, discern credible information, and resist manipulation by disinformation. Positive and fact-based narratives can counteract the spread of negative, divisive, and false narratives that seek to undermine democratic institutions and social cohesion. There was a reminder on the importance of partnering with journalists, filmmakers, artists, and writers to create and disseminate compelling stories that reflect democratic values and the European experience. Social media, blogs, podcasts, and other digital tools can be used to reach a wider audience, especially younger generations, with engaging and interactive content.

### Promoting inclusivity and diversity

Narratives that reflect the diversity of Europe, including the experiences and contributions of different ethnic, cultural, and social groups, can promote a more inclusive society. Combatting the toxic narrative about migrants and refugees is a priority. At the same time, the far right and toxic narratives are pushing traditional political parties to adopt and repurpose these harmful views. There was a call to explore alternative language and actively listen to and understand the roots of today's narratives. Sharing stories that challenge stereotypes and prejudices can help to foster greater understanding and acceptance of diversity, thus strengthening social cohesion.

### Child and Youth engagement

Developing narratives by children and youth can resonate with younger generations. Focusing on their aspirations, challenges, and potential to drive change, can increase their engagement and investment in democratic processes. Narrative that emphasizes how current actions and decisions impact the future can inspire young people to take an active role in shaping that future.

### Conclusion

The Geneva Democracy Dialogue highlighted the critical need to revitalize democratic values and practices. It called for continued engagement and commitment to promoting democracy through positive narratives, personal accountability, and addressing the challenges posed by misinformation and authoritarianism. The findings from this meeting will be shared at the Caux Forum in July and a second edition of the Geneva Democracy Dialogues is being planned during the Geneva Democracy Week in October 2024.