

Democracies under threat

From disinformation to digital technocracy

26th September, 2025

Jordi Maragall room, CIDOB. Elisabets 12, 08001 Barcelona

Organised by: CIDOB with the support of the Ministry for European Union and Foreign Action of the Government of Catalonia and the CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) programme of the European Commission

The triumph of liberal democracy, announced by Francis Fukuyama after the fall of the Berlin Wall, has ended up leading to a process of disenchantment and a profound crisis of liberalism. The optimism, reflected in the idea that democracy would naturally expand with free trade and globalisation, was contested by a hyperconnected world. Liberal democracies have faced a concatenation of crises -financial, health, social or securitarian- while technology transformed both the spaces of politicisation and the global order balance.

Since the *end of history*, democratic systems have been subjected to internal and external threats. But, above all, to a digital revolution that has fully impacted the complexity of the entire democratic public spheres; which have been confronted with new power asymmetries in favour of technological giants turned into guardians of the virtual spaces of socialisation and public opinion formation.

Moreover, the electoral growth of the radical right in the EU has contributed to the erosion of the "permissive consensus" that, for decades, guaranteed the tacit support of citizens for the European integration process, now being replaced by the "constraining dissensus". This has translated into opposition to keep sharing competencies with Brussels and growing proposals of renationalisation, but has also meant the transformation of internal solidarity mechanisms, and an increase in political contestation and polarisation.

In this circumstances of uncertainty and fragmentation, where the perception of facts is increasingly mediated by emotions, far-right parties have gained influence in governments around the world. The emergence of disinformation represents a new social conflict impacting public discourse and human security. And it also has far-reaching implications for human rights and democratic norms, eroding institutional trust, distorting electoral processes, and even fostering digital violence and repression. Meanwhile, the return of Donald Trump to the White House endorses and emboldens the political agendas of reactionary forces worldwide.

Given this context where democracy is questioned both internally and externally, it is necessary to answer certain questions: Why has the democratisation process stopped or even reversed globally? What are the reasons for this authoritarian temptation? What are the internal threats that strain European democracies and how to address them? How can the quality of political discussion and the integrity of electoral processes be improved? How can regulatory measures and international cooperation be strengthened to counter disinformation? How can democratic spaces be protected? What roles can public authorities and regional governments play?

To answer these questions, CIDOB, with the support of the Ministry for European Union and Foreign Action of the Government of Catalonia, and within the framework of the DigiDem-EU project, co-funded by the CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) programme of the European Commission, organises the conference "Democracies Under Threat" with the aim of establishing it as an annual high-level meeting for reflection and joint thinking on how to strengthen and protect democratic systems from the threats that weaken them. This first edition of the conference aims to analyse the impact of this algorithmic transformation of democracy: from the disruptive capacity of disinformation to the power imbalances brought about by this so-called technocracy that acts as a global political power, to the legislative responses, now under threat, to limit the monopolistic and disruptive power of social networks.

This event, which will be held in Barcelona on September 26, 2025, will consist of two different reflection spaces: a day of debate among international experts; and a publication gathering the main ideas formulated during the conference.

The seminar will be held in English.

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- 09.30 – 09.40 **Welcome remarks**
Jaume Duch, Minister for European Union and Foreign Action, Government of Catalonia
Pol Morillas, Director, CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs)
- 09.40 – 09.45 **Video message**
Michael McGrath, Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, European Commission
- 09.45 – 10.15 **Protecting democracy in the age of polarisation**
Kata Tüttő, President, European Committee of the Regions; City Councilor of Budapest
Dialogue with: **Pol Morillas**, Director, CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs)
- 10.15 – 11.30 **Protection of Democratic Spaces: Radicalisation, Negationism, and Interference**
Eviane Leidig, Associate Fellow, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)
Aaron Winter, Senior Lecturer, Lancaster University
Doreen Grove, Head of Open Government, Scottish Government
Beatriz Marín García, Data Analysis Team Leader, Strategic Communication, EEAS
Moderated by: **Javier Borràs**, Researcher, CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs)
- 11.30 – 12.00 **Coffee break**
- 12.00 – 13.15 **Protection of Democratic Spaces: Informational Disorder and Freedom of Expression**
Eduardo Suárez, Head of Editorial, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University
Lena-Maria Böswald, Senior Policy Researcher Digital Public Sphere, Interface
Carolina Caeiro, Director of Policy, Oxford Information Labs and the DNS Research Federation; Board member, Chequeado
Andrea Costafreda, General Director of Development Cooperation, Government of Catalonia
Moderated by: **Anna Bosch**, Journalist, TVE
- 13.15 – 14.30 **Working lunch**

14.30 – 15.00 Keynote speech: Democracy, Algorithms, and AI

Rachel George, Lecturer, Stanford University; Consultant, Carnegie California, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Dialogue with: **Carme Colomina**, Senior Research Fellow, CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs)

15.00 – 16.15 How to Address the Erosion of Democratic Institutions?

Miriam Juan-Torres, Head of Research, Othering and Belonging Institute

Ulrike Guérot, Founder and co-director, European Democracy Lab

Márton Tompos, Member of Parliament, Hungary

Joan Donovan, Founder, The Critical Internet Studies Institute; Assistant Professor of Journalism and Emerging Media Studies, Boston University

Moderated by: **Héctor Sánchez Margalef**, Research Fellow, CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs)

16.15 – 16.30 Closing remarks

Agustí Fernández de Losada, State Secretary for European Affairs, Multilateral and Development Cooperation, Government of Catalonia