DEMOCRACY WITHOUT BORDERS

Report on the Expert Round Table

The UN: Problem or Pathway for Freedom and Democracy?

Berlin, 11 November 2025

Contents: A. Introduction and summary—B. Full report—1. Setting and framing of the discussion—2. Diagnosis: authoritarian influence—3. How participants see the UN today—4. Counter-strategies: how to respond to authoritarian influence—5. Specific institutional and policy proposals—6. Consensus, divergences and final reflections—C. Participants

A. Introduction and summary

The round table on "The UN: problem or pathway for freedom and democracy?" took place on 11 November 2025 in Berlin, during Berlin Freedom Week and following the 2025 General Assembly of the World Liberty Congress (WLC) in Berlin.

Convened by Democracy Without Borders it brought together sixteen experts, civil society representatives, and dissidents from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin-America for an intimate discussion on whether the United Nations can still be "reclaimed as a platform for freedom and democracy in face of authoritarian influence." Kick-off speakers included Lars Castelluci, the German government's Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Assistance; Mantas Adomėnas, Secretary-General of the Community of Democracies; Lisbeth Pilegaard, Chair of the Executive Committee, European Endowment for Democracy and Ammar Abdulhamid, Chief Governance and Policy Officer, World Liberty Congress, among others.

The organisers framed the debate around four core questions: to what extent authoritarian influence at the UN is considered a problem; how that influence materializes in practice; to what extent the UN is still a platform to promote democracy; and which changes or measures should be initiated or pursued further.

Participants agreed that authoritarian influence has become a significant issue that hampers the UN's ability to promote human rights and democracy. In the conversation it was pointed out that autocratic governments coordinate successfully in UN bodies to shape agendas, resolutions and voting patterns in their interest and to restrict civil society participation. In the Human Rights Council (HRC) they were said to shield one another from scrutiny.

Despite frustration and criticism, there appeared to be a consensus that the UN was indispensable as a universal platform including all governments, in particular to help maintain international peace and

security. At the same time, it was recognized that the world's people needed to be directly involved and represented in the organization. Support for the creation of a UN Parliamentary Assembly, voiced by several speakers, remained unchallenged. Proposals for citizens' participation put forward were a World Citizens' Initiative and Citizens' Assemblies.

The need for UN reforms was widely shared, but the scope and ambition was debated. While the work of UN agencies was appreciated by some as impactful on the ground, others characterized them as too bureaucratic. The UN80 reform process was called "existential" by one speaker.

In terms of ambitious institutional reforms, such as a review of the UN Charter, the participants held diverging views. While some voiced support, a majority appeared to lean towards a cautious approach and warned there was a risk of worsening the situation and no political momentum.

In the field of democracy promotion and authoritarian influence, there was a common perception that democratic governments have lost the initiative and failed to mount an adequate response. Participants emphasised the need for democracies and prodemocracy actors to "join forces" and contest authoritarian governments at the UN. The idea of a "circle of friends" for human rights formed by like-minded governments was put forward.

One speaker noted that the best democracy promotion was for democracies to lead by example and serve as appealing models. Another speaker conceded, however, that too often democratic governments were "unable to deliver" in this regard. Some participants underlined the importance of pursuing compelling, values-based narratives and emotional, people-centred communication, instead of a focus on democratic procedures and institutions.

The appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on Democracy was endorsed by many speakers and characterized as a test. Is the UN even able to "appoint one person to defend democracy?" one participant asked. Nonetheless, other participants wondered what exactly the mandate would entail. Disappointment with existing mandates was expressed together with a warning not to proliferate such mandates further and instead make current arrangements work.

In the meeting's conclusion, the perceived lack of political will to advance meaningful prodemocracy initiatives was pointed out: "where are the democratic governments who are willing to take the lead?"

Participants noted that having conversations such as this was already a small step forward and many voiced an interest in staying involved and helping advance some of the items elaborated on.

B. Full report

1. Setting and framing of the discussion

The round table was announced as a space where “experts and activists debate whether the UN can be reclaimed as a platform for freedom and democracy in face of authoritarian influence,” with the stated goal of an “honest, solution-oriented exchange among global freedom defenders, challenging assumptions and shaping ideas for regaining democratic initiative at the UN.”

In the opening remarks, the scale of the problem was underlined: according to the figures cited, 70% of the world’s population live in countries not entirely free, and 59 or 31% of UN General Assembly member states are “not free.” It was recalled that the World Liberty Congress’s Berlin manifesto warns that the UN and other bodies are “too often paralyzed or even subverted by autocratic regimes.” These observations set the tone for a conversation focused on what one participant called a “unique juncture characterized by several crises concerning narratives and institutions.”

2. Diagnosis: authoritarian influence

One speaker emphasized that membership in intergovernmental organizations “have shifted to autocracies” and that so-called “authoritarian clubs” were emerging. At the regional level, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was mentioned, while at the UN itself, the “Group of Friends for the Defense of the UN Charter” was noted as an infamous example. These groupings were seen as vehicles through which autocratic states “use the UN to advance their position” and “shift the discourse and language to their advantage.” It was noted that a key mechanism was for authoritarian states to “adopt resolutions” which was an implicit reference to their influence on agenda-setting, drafting and negotiation processes.

Authoritarian influence was said to be particularly visible in the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), where “authoritarian states in the HRC are an issue” and “autocratic regimes protect each other” when confronted with their human rights abuses. This observation was placed against a backdrop of “broad civil society repression” in many countries. One speaker observed that “governments are generally unwilling to criticize each other.” Another noted that China in particular was “trying to shift funding away from human rights.”

Some contributions looked back to the 1990s as a missed opportunity. It was described as “a fault of the democratic world” that it did not create a new set of institutions to “enshrine the gains of the third wave of democratization” at the time. The Community of Democracies was recalled as an attempt at such an intergovernmental coalition; it reportedly had 106 supporting states at its start in 2000 and now has around 30, illustrating a loss of momentum and commitment of democratic states over time.

3. How participants see the UN today

The discussion included a broader reflection on the UN’s overall health and purpose. One participant stressed that it was in their government’s interest “that the UN works,” suggesting a national stake in multilateral effectiveness. The ongoing UN80 reform process was described as “existential.”

Concerns about the risks of bold institutional redesign were voiced by several participants. One stated that "trying to fix the UN may make it worse than it is now" and another that "it is also dangerous to try remaking the UN: the new system might become even worse." In the same vein, a participant said not to be "supportive of the idea of bold UN reforms." One speaker warned that "the remake that is required now requires enormous will and consensus which does not exist," raising the question of political feasibility. The observation that there was a lack of political will was a recurrent theme throughout the discussion.

It was argued that the UN should be defended and improved rather than replaced. The point was made that "we just need to make the UN functional again" and that "a new institution would do more bad than good." Participants appeared to agree that "despite all criticism, the UN should not be abandoned, there is no alternative." The metaphor of the UN as a "family that is not functional but it is our family" captured the tension between frustration and attachment.

Some speakers revisited the UN's normative foundations. It was pointed out that "the word democracy is not found in the UN Charter," although Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights "spells out the ingredients" of democratic governance. At the same time, the UN's "primary purpose" was recalled as the promotion of "peace and security worldwide." One speaker argued that there was a double character: peace first, but with an implicit democratic horizon. If the latter was indeed the case, the same speaker noted, the UN "has failed."

Several remarks underscored the UN's universal character and how this represents a tension with democracy promotion. The UN "does not care about the regime type of its members," it was said. Further, it was noted more generally that "exchange between governments cannot work on the precondition of democratic change." Some stated that "the UN should be preserved as a platform for all regardless of regime type."

The point was made that the UN was broader than the core organization and its main bodies. It was noted that "the UN agencies do the important work on the ground and contribute to how the UN is perceived in the public." A different speaker, however, described the UN's agencies as "bureaucratic monsters that need reform too and need to be minimized." Overall, the UN as a whole was characterized as "bureaucratic" with its funding heavily dependent on only "two major payers."

It was noted that the UN was "too member state-based" and that people needed avenues of involvement and representation beyond the executive branches of governments. Building on this point, one of the participants noted that there are "460 million indigenous peoples, living in a postapocalyptic world" and that they "need to have proper UN representation." This was tied back to the question of "who represents the people at the UN?" and the notion of a democratic deficit at the UN.

4. Counter-strategies: how to respond to authoritarian influence

Faced with what many saw as an encroaching authoritarian presence, the discussion also touched on counter-strategies. There was broad agreement that democracies "have to join forces." One participant proposed building a "Circle of friends of human rights" at the UN, noting that "the opponents are

standing together." Others argued that "autocracies need to be pushed into the defensive" and that "pressure should be on the authoritarian regimes." One speaker insisted that the "UN should be a battleground from now on to regain initiative," not a space conceded to autocratic actors. The UN should be "reminded that it is a normative institution." One participant noted that "restriction of voting rights in the UN should be considered" in certain cases.

Participants elaborated on the relevance of "narratives". Opponents of democracy were said to "have strong narratives" and that "captured narratives need to be reclaimed by democracies." In this context, democracies were urged to "be role models," with one participant describing this as "the best way of democracy promotion." In this context, another speaker pointed to the "key problem" that democracies have often been "unable to deliver."

In terms of narratives, it was stressed that "a focus on emotions is necessary," pointing to the need for more compelling, human-centred communication instead of a focus on institutions and procedures.

Civil society and citizens were repeatedly at the centre of discussion. One statement asserted that "civil society is the only place where change can come from" and that "civic society should also play a role" in shaping multilateral responses. One intervention insisted that "the people need power, that's where we need to start," while another demanded that "power needs to be put back into the hands of the people." Participants agreed that "we need tools that loosen the grip of Member States," opening up space for non-state voices within the UN system.

In terms of financial priorities, it was noted that if "5% of GDP can be spent on defense, there should be enough money for the UN too," and further that "saving democracy is also part of defense."

5. Specific institutional and policy proposals

A portion of the conversation focused on concrete reform ideas, several of which had been signalled in the event invitation as key topics.

Many interventions expressed clear support for a UN Special Rapporteur on Democracy (UNROD). One speaker described the proposal as "a test of how far we can get at this time," suggesting that "we should keep testing the waters." Another said that the proposed "UNROD by itself should be used as a reminder that democracy was always to be the end goal of the UN." For such a mandate to come into being, "political will is needed," and it was argued that "small steps are needed in the HRC to advance towards a UNROD." Is the UN even able "to appoint one person to defend democracy?" one participant asked.

Participants drew on past experience with other mandates. It was recalled that in 2005 "a core group of state friends was assembled for a mandate on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI)" and that "a lot can be learned" from how this mandate "was established successfully." The implication was that a similar "core group" strategy could be employed to create a democracy-related mandate such as UNROD.

However, these calls were accompanied by questions about substance and design. One participant asked “what do we expect from a UNROD mandate?” and “what is the job description of a UNROD? It cannot be to blame others for not being democratic.” Further it was noted that there are already “too many” HRC mandates, leading one speaker to ask, “why is there no HRC mandate on democracy as there are so many others?”

But not all participants were enthusiastic about creating new mandates. One said to be “very sceptical about new mandates,” giving the example of the Special Rapporteur on coercive measures, who was said to be from Belarus and to “serve authoritarian interests.” This participant argued that “there should not be a proliferation of HRC Special Procedure mandates,” and that instead “the existing system should be made to work” with a view of the treaty bodies.

The idea of a UN Parliamentary Assembly (UNPA) attracted support as well. One speakers stated that “of the proposals at hand, the UN Parliamentary Assembly is the favored one,” with another describing the proposal as “a game changer and the real test,” in contrast to appointing a UNROD, which was called “only a small test.” Another participant said that “the UNPA is a really great idea, a place for dialogue.” Functions mentioned for such a body included giving “opposition a voice” at the UN level.

The concept of a “democratic caucus at the UN” was welcomed by one speaker alongside UNPA and UNROD as part of a package of democratic innovations. The idea of a “Group of Friends” was raised to push these proposals forward.

In terms of citizen participation at the UN, several instruments were discussed. A “World Citizens’ Initiative for people participation” was proposed, along with “proper mechanisms to include Citizens’ Assemblies”.

One participant expressed “support of the Article 109 coalition for a review of the UN Charter,” pointing to this provision as a formal avenue to reconsider the organisation’s basic framework. Others, however, connected such ambitions to the earlier warnings that “trying to fix the UN may make it worse than it is now,” illustrating a divergence over the feasibility and desirability of far-reaching change at this moment.

While the UN was the discussion’s focus, some participants emphasized the importance of parallel or complementary frameworks. One participant described the World Liberty Congress and the Community of Democracies as “alternatives,” the former especially from the perspective of those in opposition to authoritarian regimes. He suggested that the WLC could also “consider including representation from non-autocratic states,” to strengthen its scope and impact.

Regional organisations were also briefly mentioned. One speaker saw “regional groupings like ECOWAS and OAS” as alternative avenues for democracy support instead of the UN. Another noted that “ASEAN has its own problems,” suggesting that there were limits to such an approach in some regions.

6. Consensus, divergences and final reflections

Over the course of the discussion, certain patterns of agreement and disagreement emerged.

On points of consensus, participants agreed that authoritarian influence at the UN has become a serious problem. The notions that autocratic governments are misusing UN institutions, are increasingly organising themselves in formal and informal alliances, and are shifting the intergovernmental balance in their favour went unchallenged. There was a shared sense that democratic states have so far failed to mount an adequate response.

At the same time, there was clear agreement that the UN remains essential. Despite frustration and criticism, the organisation was seen as irreplaceable, with unique legitimacy to advance democracy worldwide. Even those who viewed the UN as dysfunctional did not call for disengagement or abandonment.

Another shared theme was the centrality of civil society and citizens. Many participants stressed that meaningful renewal of the UN as a supporter of democracy requires shifting power and influence towards people and civic actors, and that a purely state-centred system can no longer meet the challenges of our time.

Important differences also emerged. One fault line concerned the scale of UN reform. Views ranged from calls for a far-reaching review of the UN Charter under Article 109 to strong scepticism towards such an ambitious institutional overhaul. A significant number of participants appeared to judge large-scale reform as politically risky and unlikely to succeed in current conditions.

Another divergence related to whether to prioritise new mandates or focus on strengthening existing mechanisms. Proponents of a UNROD considered it a necessary addition and a powerful symbol of the UN's original democratic aspirations. Skeptics on the other hand cautioned against an ongoing proliferation of special procedures and pointed to what they saw as negative examples.

Participants repeatedly urged each other to avoid paralysis. "The conversation should not lead to depression," one speaker said early on, and another echoed the sentiment that "we must keep dialogues like this going." Another observed that "the conversation itself is already a small step."

There was a frank recognition of current limitations. "We need to start with accepting reality," one participant states. Acknowledgements such as that democracies often fail to deliver for their citizens were paired with a sense of responsibility. For instance, it was called "a duty to find a way to renew the UN," and several voices insisted that political leadership "needs to pick up proposals" coming from experts and civil society in this field.

But the "elephant in the room" pointed out in the meeting's conclusion was the question: "where are the democratic governments who are willing to take the lead and do the work?"

C. Participants

In alphabetical order.

1. Ammar Abdulhamid, Chief Governance and Policy Officer (Parliamentarian), World Liberty Congress, Syria/USA
2. Mantas Adomėnas, Secretary-General, Community of Democracies, Lithuania
3. Tamara Adrián, Professor of Law, UCV and UNIMET, Caracas; former Member of Parliament, Venezuela; Venezuela
4. Oguzhan Albayrak, Delegate, World Liberty Congress, Turkey
5. Anyama Alfred Berliner, Delegate, World Liberty Congress, Uganda
6. Andreas Bummel, Executive Director, Democracy Without Borders, Germany
7. Lars Castelluci, Member of the German Bundestag; Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Assistance, Federal Foreign Office, Germany
8. Ekkehard Griep, Chair, United Nations Association of Germany, Germany
9. Maria Debre, Chair for International Relations, Department of Political and Social Sciences, Zeppelin University, Germany
10. James Joseph, Director, The Duty Legacy and The Alliance for the Prevention of Atrocity Crimes, United Kingdom
11. Jan Königshausen, Advisor Indigenous Peoples, Society for Threatened Peoples, Germany
12. Sochua Mu Leiper, President, Khmer Movement for Democracy; former Member of Parliament; Delegate, World Liberty Congress, Cambodia/USA
13. Lisbeth Pilegaard, Chair, Executive Committee, European Endowment for Democracy, Denmark
14. Andrei Sannikov, European Belarus Foundation; Delegate, World Liberty Congress, Poland
15. Rasmus Tenbergen, Democracy Without Borders, Germany
16. Caroline Vernaillen, Lead Global Policy & Advocacy, Democracy International, Belgium