# Democracy and the Liberal World Order Amid the Rise of Authoritarianism

Leveraging the Digital Public Sphere to Revive Trust in Democracy

Nicolas Cimarra Etchenique







## **Project on Europe and the Transatlantic Relationship**

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# **Foreword**

Multilateral diplomacy has been my main field of work since I joined the Spanish Foreign Service in 2005. I've been fortunate enough to serve in several multilateral settings, including the United Nations in New York and the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) in Vienna. Throughout my diplomatic career, I've often asked myself: is it possible to achieve a better international cooperation, one that is up to the task of adequately addressing the main challenges and threats that humanity is facing in the 21st century? How will governments and societies manage to mobilize the energies that are required to confront the worsening climate emergency, or the disruptions that will be caused by AI?

It didn't take me too long to understand that our institutions and, more importantly, our mental frameworks, are ill-equipped to deal with a rapidly changing global reality. My two-year experience in the UN Security Council, during Spain's tenure in 2015-2016, confirmed this impression. My work at the OSCE reinforced it. As Deputy Permanent Representative for politico-military affairs, I had the honor to coordinate the Structured Dialogue process in 2020-2021, which was chaired by the Spanish Ambassador to the OSCE, Luis Cuesta. This process had been launched a few years before, with the aim of restoring a certain level of understanding on security challenges and conventional arms control amongst OSCE participating States (pS). The Spanish Chairmanship adopted the following motto for its tenure: "Understanding for Security" (or U4S). The process of dialogue was conceived as a sequence that should follow and respect four essential steps: listening, reflecting, sharing and learning. All delegations engaged as constructively as they could. Distrust between capitals, however, burdened the efforts made in Vienna. It ran too high since Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.

When the Kremlin launched its full-scale illegal invasion of Ukraine on February last year, despite all international efforts to prevent it, including at the OSCE, any remnants of trust that might have been left between pS were shattered. Some months later, in September 2022, I started my fellowship at the Belfer Center. My aim was to envisage possible ways to regenerate trust 'internationally', in order to be able to reestablish a robust European Security Architecture in the future.

During this journey, I came to the conclusion that, for that to happen, democratic resilience needed to be enhanced first. The reason is that, as long as autocracies, and particularly Russia and China, believe that they can achieve a reshaping of the world order that suits their interests, I consider that they are likely to keep pursuing that objective, even by coercion and force. Liberal democracies, therefore, need to prepare for a protracted confrontation, a new Cold War, with Moscow and Beijing. A competition between democracy and autocracy is currently unfolding.

Russia and China, certainly, face huge challenges in this competition. However, as I started focusing on the situation of the democratic 'home front', and its interconnection with the geopolitical situation, I reached a second conclusion: distrust and polarization run too high in liberal democracies. This is the case in the U.S., which faced an electoral crisis in 2020-21, and will face a very challenging election in 2024, but also in other western democracies. Distrust and polarization are strategic vulnerabilities of democracies, and autocracies are exploiting them through hybrid warfare and disinformation. This reality is a central element of the new Cold War, if not the main one.

At this juncture of my research, I asked myself the logical question: how can democracies depolarize and restore their citizens' trust? How can they achieve this, in the midst of the renewed great power competition, and the emerging challenge of AI? There are certainly many possible approaches to this conundrum. My choice was to focus on what I consider most relevant: the development of a well-functioning digital public sphere. In my view, if democracies manage to develop a constructive online civic dialogue between citizens, based on reliable information, distrust and polarization will wane. Why I consider this to be of critical importance, and a proposal on how to move in that direction, is the object of this paper.

# **About the Author**

Nicolas Cimarra Etchenique is the Rafael del Pino-Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fellow at the Project on Europe and the Transatlantic Relationship. He joined the Spanish Foreign Service in 2005. He was posted to the Embassy of Spain to Ethiopia and to the African Union (2008-2011), the Embassy of Spain to Pakistan (2011-2012) and the Mission of Spain to the United Nations (2012-2017). From 2019 to 2022 Cimarra Etchenique served as the Deputy Permanent Representative for political and military affairs at the Permanent Representation of Spain to the OSCE, and he was the Coordinator of the Structured Dialogue process in 2020 and 2021.

In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, he has served as Desk Officer at the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (2005-2006), as Desk Officer at the EU Directorate (2007-2008), and as Assistant Deputy Director at the Africa Directorate (2017-2019). He graduated in Law from Universidad Complutense of Madrid.

# **About the Project on Europe and Transatlantic Relationship**

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# $\hbox{``A house divided against itself cannot stand.''}$

- Abraham Lincoln. Illinois Republican State Convention, Springfield, Illinois June 16, 1858

# **Executive Summary**

Democracies must strengthen their home front to succeed in the competition with Russia and China that has resulted in a new Cold War and a new battle between democracy and autocracy. Democracies are experiencing high polarization, which is undermining democratic governance and trust in democracy itself. Democratic backsliding in the West has major geopolitical implications. It compromises the West's international position and degrades U.S. and European soft power. Furthermore, distrust and internal divisions are exploited by autocracies. Autocracies will continue undermining the liberal world order as long as the crisis of liberal democracy is not reverted. To uphold democracy and the liberal world order, the U.S. and the EU must lead an effort to regenerate democracies' public spheres, which are seriously damaged.

Media, and particularly social media, is playing a central role on the rise of distrust and polarization in democracies. Large for-profit digital platforms, such as Twitter (now "X"), TikTok or Facebook, are contributing to this corrosive process. Furthermore, social media has been weaponized by Russia and China to manipulate political divisions and interfere in electoral processes in democracies.

## The quickly accelerating development of AI makes the situation more pressing.

Autocracies are using digital technologies and AI to enhance their surveillance and repressive capacities. Within democracies, unregulated, or poorly regulated AI, may work as a Trojan horse of autocracy: it may deliver productivity gains and geopolitical advantages to the U.S., but in a way that could backfire against democracy, as it could dramatically erode social trust. Today, democracies' public spheres can be hacked by autocratic actors using digital platforms and increasingly sophisticated AI tools. Tomorrow, if human responsibility is massively outsourced to inadequately regulated AI, trust levels in democracy could further plummet.

In order to address the crisis of democracy and preserve the liberal world order, the U.S. and the EU should cooperate to revive trust in democracy at the domestic and the international levels. Such cooperation must synchronically confront three sets of challenges:

- 1. Great power competition and the authoritarian offensive against democracy,
- 2. The rise of political polarization and illiberalism, and
- 3. The adverse impact of social media and AI on democracy.

These sets of challenges feed on distrust and amplify it. As a result, they have evolved into a series of cycles of distrust within democracies and into a great geopolitical cycle of distrust.

The entanglement and feedback loops among the domestic and the geopolitical cycles of distrust have resulted in a cohesive threat to democracy: a downward political spiral that is pulling societies towards enmity. This spiral feeds on and generates destructive human emotions at massive scale, such as outrage and hatred, that lead to violence, war, and autocracy, so it can be better understood as a dangerous global maelstrom of distrust, which could sink democracy worldwide. As showcased by historical evidence, domestic and international forces do not act in isolation from each other. Democratic backsliding, the rise of authoritarianism and totalitarianism, and the politics of aggression generated feedback loops in the 1930s, that resulted in WWII. Similar forces are again working in the 2020s.

If massive distrust can wreck democracy worldwide, it follows that the regeneration of trust is the path to democratic revitalization. Recommendations to regenerate trust in democracy:

1. Civic dialogue should act as a compass, or lighthouse, of democratic revival. Democracy is, in essence, a dialogue, that takes place within institutions and among citizens. Dialogue shapes the public sphere of democracies. A civic dialogue based on truthful information can cut through the noise of polarization and shine through the darkness of disinformation. A strategic segment of civic dialogue is channeled and framed by digital technologies. To regenerate civic dialogue, democracies should work together on innovative strategies to contain the systemic risks of social media and AI on democratic governance. Stricter regulations of social media and AI and enforcement of anti-trust legislation are necessary but might not be sufficient. Complementary paths must also be explored.

- 2. The EU and the U.S. should promote the development a network of safe havens for civic life online. In doing so, they would be leading a process to make digital platforms and AI work to regenerate democracy and the liberal world order.
- These safe havens could consist of global public options of civic platforms (PCPs). PCPs would be an alternative to exiting social media for political deliberations, and an anchor of different e-governance tools. They would provide a public service designed to allow and enhance a civic democratic deliberation among citizens, based on reliable information. Their inner governance could be managed through partnerships of CSOs, academia and citizen juries, that would form Digital Civic Communities (DCCs).
- PCPs, managed by DCCs, would provide safe havens for civic life online. They could function as 'digital town squares', in a way that for-profit social media cannot. They could be connected to democratic institutions by 'digital bridges', ensuring reliable information and adequate standards on ID verification, privacy, and security. The digital public sphere is loosely regulated, fragmented, and vulnerable to hacking by nefarious actors. As a result, it extends its disruptive effects to democratic institutions designed long before digital technologies could be imagined. PCPs could be the cornerstone of a transatlantic effort to regenerate civic dialogue and democracy in the digital age.
- 3. An International Agency for Cooperation on AI for Democracy (IACAID, or Agency) should coordinate the network, setting standards and ensuring adequate PCP and DCC oversight. Through its creation, the U.S. and the EU would not only protect civic deliberation in their own societies, sheltering the public sphere from autocratic interferences. They would also revitalize the transatlantic relationship and their democratic soft power, sending a signal of moral, political, and technological leadership to the international community. The Agency would constitute the centerpiece of a strategy, named AI for Democracy (AI4D), designed to bring democracies together into a global effort to protect and restore democracy, and the liberal world order. After its creation by the EU and the U.S., the Agency should open its doors to other OECD countries, establish mechanisms to allow the participation of countries transitioning

to democracy as Observers, and promote dialogue with non-democratic countries. By creating the AI4D system, democracies would take a major step to restore civic dialogue and trust in democracy, revitalizing their soft power. This system would protect and promote democracy worldwide, and help democracies navigate the global maelstrom of distrust.

# **Introduction**

In March 2022, reacting to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, President Biden described the new global reality as a "battle between democracy and autocracy". With these words, he conveyed the message that democracy and the liberal world order were being challenged by the most powerful autocracies: Russia, but also China. This being the case, what is the situation of democracy worldwide? The reality in this regard is that it has been receding globally since the Great Recession. It is not in good shape to face a battle with autocracy.

The crisis of liberal democracy is a global phenomenon, which includes quantitative and qualitative elements. However, from the perspective of the preservation of the liberal world order, democratic backsliding does not matter the same everywhere: since the U.S. is still the most powerful country in the world, the condition of its democracy matters most to global stability. The situation in EU countries is also decisive, as the EU represents the third largest economic bloc in the world and the largest union of advanced liberal democracies on Earth. For these reasons, this paper will focus primarily on the political situation in the U.S. and establish connections and comparisons with other democracies, mainly in Europe, when appropriate.

While great power competition is the domain of geopolitics, democratic resilience mostly concerns domestic politics. President Biden has defined the domestic political challenges to democracy in the U.S. as a 'battle for the soul of the nation'<sup>3</sup>. This narrative correlates with the 'battle between democracy and autocracy' that takes place at the geopolitical level. Rising distrust in government and society, polarization and illiberalism are particularly relevant to the international position of Washington and its soft power, as they are compromising democratic stability within the U.S.

The paper will be divided in two parts: a diagnosis, called 'the global maelstrom of distrust', and a policy proposal, called 'the lighthouse of democracy'.

The diagnosis focuses on the cumulative effect of three sets of challenges to democracy: a) great power competition and the authoritarian offensive against democracy, b) the rise of polarization and illiberalism, and c) the impact of social media and AI on democracy. This section of the paper will argue that these sets

of challenges feed on distrust and amplify it. Furthermore, they have evolved into a series of cycles of distrust within democracies and into a great geopolitical cycle of distrust. Finally, the entanglement and feedback loops among the domestic and the geopolitical cycles of distrust have generated a cohesive threat to democracy. This threat is represented by a downward spiral that is pulling societies and the global community towards enmity. It feeds on and generates destructive human emotions, such as outrage and hatred, which include a strong irrational and unconscious dimension, and thus leads to violence, war, and autocracy. In consequence, it can be better understood as a dangerous global maelstrom, which could sink democracy worldwide. The global maelstrom of distrust has a geopolitical and a domestic expression. If distrust and polarization reach a certain threshold in the international arena, war ensues. If both forces reach a certain threshold domestically, civil war, or democratic collapse, ensues.

The policy proposal has been named 'the lighthouse of democracy', for three reasons. First, because it focuses on the promotion of civic dialogue based on reliable information to protect and promote trust in democracy. The metaphor of the lighthouse has sometimes been applied to the press, because free and independent journalism sheds light on the work of government and all matters relevant to the civic life of a democracy. Reliable information is a necessary condition of a functioning civic dialogue and a cohesive public sphere. In this paper, the concept of the lighthouse is applied to the entire public sphere: the argument is that democracy dies in darkness, distrust and violence, but it can recover in the light of trust, civic dialogue and cooperation. A cohesive public sphere is a necessary condition for democratic regeneration.

The second reason is that the metaphor of the lighthouse is a representation of the positive soft power of democracy, as opposed to the negative soft power of authoritarianism.<sup>7</sup> The 'shining city on a hill' is a Biblical concept used by the U.S. political leadership as an expression of the country's exceptionalism; the metaphor of the 'lighthouse' can be applied to any democracy with a cohesive public sphere that respects the rule of law and human rights, including full political equality.<sup>8</sup> The third reason is that the policy proposal constitutes an idealized framework for a well-functioning digital public sphere that can better work for democracy and the liberal world order. As a lighthouse, its purpose is to signal a direction of navigation, away from the maelstrom of distrust and towards democratic recovery, but not an end-destination. Given its long-term ambitions, the destination lies beyond the horizon

and, as is known, the devil is in the details. However, despite all obstacles, the journey is worth the effort.

The dark, violent, maelstrom is laid in opposition to the bright, expansive lighthouse, in the same way that autocracy lays in opposition to democracy. The maelstrom and the lighthouse ultimately represent two key forces of the human psyche: fear, that leads to distrust and violence, and hope, that leads to trust, dialogue and cooperation. All humans and all human societies have always faced the tension inherent in this polarity. To remain free, democracies need to observe and understand the pulling force of fear and follow the guidance of hope based on facts. The restoration of civic dialogue and trust is the most powerful instrument at their disposal. <sup>10</sup>

# The Global Maelstrom of Distrust: Democracy and The Liberal World Order Amid The Rise Of Authoritarianism

# **General background**

Trust in democratic governments and institutions has been eroding globally. It plummeted after the Great Recession, and then again with the COVID-19 pandemic. The OECD Trust Survey finds public confidence is evenly split between people who say they trust their national government and those who do not. On average, about four in ten people say they trust their national government (41.4%) and another four in ten (41.1%) say they do not. The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer, tracking respondents in 28 countries, reaches similar conclusions. It affirms that "government and media fuel a vicious cycle of distrust", as nearly one out of two respondents view government and media as divisive forces in society. The society of the countries is a divisive forces in society.

The situation in the U.S. is particularly problematic. According to More in Common's research, less than one in four Americans believe the federal government, American corporations, and national media to be honest. This distrust is not limited to institutions either: fewer than two in five Americans feel "most people can be trusted". The Pew Research Center has informed of a steady decline of public trust in government since 1958. Gallup reaches similar conclusions for trust in media and confirms that Americans trust in this key institution for democracy remains near record low.

The situation appears to be relatively better for the EU, albeit not as much for all of its Member States at the national level. The summer 2022 Standard Eurobarometer showed increased trust in the EU and continued strong support for the EU's response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The positive image of the EU was then at 47%, its highest level since autumn 2009, while 36% of respondents had neutral views and 16% negative views about the EU. In addition, 49% of Europeans tend to trust the EU. However, this survey also indicated that only 34% of respondents tend to trust their national government. <sup>17</sup> Levels of trust in government are low in many EU countries. <sup>18</sup>

Trust in democracies has been steadily eroding, but it is uncertain whether a similar phenomenon is taking place within autocracies. The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer suggests this is not happening. However, as Peter T. Coleman, professor of psychology and education at Teachers College Columbia University, has noted, it is problematic to compare measures of trust between democracies and autocracies. He has observed that the most trusted nations identified in the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer report are China, UAE, India, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Thailand, while the least trusted included Spain, the UK, the US, Germany, Japan and South Korea. However, many of the top "trusted" nations are some of the most corrupt and least transparent in the world, according to Transparency International. <sup>19</sup> As professor Coleman asks, "Might it be that respondents in these societies are less inclined to report feelings of institutional distrust in a survey than, say, citizens of Germany and the U.S.? So, what, exactly, are we to make of such results? Are autocracies better at instilling trust or arousing fear?" <sup>20</sup>

According to Kevin Valier of the Niskanen Center, political trust literature shows that authoritarian regimes can exhibit high levels of political trust, as long as they manage corruption and economic performance effectively.<sup>21</sup> This could be the case of China, where trust in government is believed to hold at around 90% of the population.<sup>22</sup> The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer established last year levels of trust in China at a record 91%.<sup>23</sup> Autocracies, however, are much better than democracies at arousing fear. Levels of social trust, government support or political polarization in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes are difficult to gauge, given the lack of political freedoms. Dissent and discontent are eclipsed by repression. Repression, at the same time, may also enhance social conformity and strengthen 'the spiral of silence', as individuals' willingness to express their opinion is often a function of how they perceive public opinion.<sup>24</sup> As a result, revolutions, civil wars and regimes' collapse in autocracies often take the international community by surprise.<sup>25</sup> What is undeniable, however, is that the last two decades have not been good for democracy worldwide, and particularly the last one. Erosion of trust in democracy is a global pattern, and so is democratic backsliding.<sup>26</sup> Different trends are driving democratic decay in the Western world and fueling the attractiveness of the authoritarian alternative.<sup>27</sup>

### **Notions of trust**

The argument that the paper advances is that the crisis of liberal democracy and of the liberal world order are, at the core, a global crisis of trust. This perspective considers trust to be at the center of social and political relations. Certainly, trust is often viewed as "the glue that holds society together." There are different definitions and understandings about what trust is. For the purpose of this policy paper, the following notions will be considered: i) trust as a belief, or idea; the difference between social and political trust, ii) trust within the binomial trust-distrust, iii) trust and emotions, iv) trust and distrust as mirror images of the media and ICT landscape, v) trust in international relations.

- i. Trust as a belief or idea: For this policy paper, trust will be considered as the belief or idea that a person (or institution, or political actor) is reliable.<sup>29</sup> A relevant difference exists between political and social trust: Social trust can be understood broadly as trust in society, or trust that persons will abide by social norms, publicly recognized, shared social rules that people both in fact expect one another to follow and think that everyone morally ought to follow. Political trust can be understood to include trust in government broadly or trust in democracy, as well as trust in more specific institutions and groups, such as the civil service, parliament, and particular elected officials.<sup>30</sup> This policy paper will focus on political trust and refer to social trust when necessary.
- ii. The binomial trust-distrust. Academically, trust can be related to two other members of its conceptual family: mistrust and distrust. As argued by Daniel Devine, Jennifer Gaskell, Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker, "political trust makes good governance possible. Mistrust (or political skepticism), in the right measure, supports good governance by driving accountability. Distrust is viewed as a threat to good governance, as it risks disengagement and disorder". Despite the high political relevance of this nuance, the literature to date has mostly focused on the presence or absence of trust. More research is required on the trinomial trust-mistrust-distrust. For this reason, this policy paper will in general gravitate around the binomial trust-distrust, and only when necessary, refer to the trinomial trust-mistrust-distrust.

- iii. Trust and emotions. The belief or idea of trust, however, is not merely neutral or rational. Philosopher and cognitive scientist Paul Thagard argues that trust is a complex neural process that includes emotions.<sup>32</sup> The importance of the emotional dimension of trust can be better understood in relation with the other members of its conceptual family. As Paul Thagard explains, "mistrusting someone is not just a prediction of betrayal, but also a bad emotional feeling about the untrustworthy person."33 Mistrust and, to a larger extent, distrust, are charged with strong negative emotions. Levels of trust in institutions, such as the ones measured by Gallup, The Pew Research Center, or the Eurobarometer, reflect large-scale societal patterns, but cannot take properly into account the emotional or unconscious dimension of distrust. They do not probe into the psyches, values or the life experiences of respondents to surveys, so they can offer no clues about how these factors might affect a given individual's inclination to trust other people.<sup>34</sup> Neither can this paper, but it shall suffice to stress that trust and distrust are not only ideas or beliefs, but also emotional realities, with an unconscious dimension.<sup>35</sup>
- iv. Trust, distrust and the media and ICT landscape. Marshall McLuhan, one of the most prominent media theorists, argued that 'the medium is the message' and that 'we shape our tools, and then our tools shape us'. In other words: we shape our media, and then our media shapes us (and our trust). Today, the Internet and social media have become the main mediums of communication and are shaping the media landscape, displacing journalism. Hence, in mass societies, to a large extent, political trust and distrust and the public sphere are nowadays mirror images of the media and social media landscape. Furthermore, AI is accelerating and bringing a whole new dimension to this reality. There is a longstanding debate on whether the influence of media on political trust is positive or negative. This policy paper will consider both effects of the media and social media aspect: trust enabling and trust eroding.
- v. Trust in international relations. Trust is at the center of diplomacy and multilateral cooperation and has always implicitly been at the center of international relations theory.<sup>38</sup> Realism, liberalism and constructivism conceive of trust differently. The theory of strategic cooperation and game theory rely on the binomial trust-distrust.<sup>39</sup> This paper will focus on the

role played by trust on two of its dimensions at the geopolitical level: great power competition and ideological competition. Trust in international relations is different from social and political trust within countries. The former applies to countries, the latter to citizens.

# The global maelstrom of distrust

The last decade and a half have shown a rise of distrust within democracies and between countries. Is there a relation between the domestic and the geopolitical cycles of distrust? Both phenomena are usually analyzed separately. However, this paper will develop the argument that there is a correlation between them, and between both and the media and ICT landscape, and that there is merit in analyzing these developments jointly. Furthermore, it will argue that rising distrust in democracy is fueling a global crisis of distrust.

To better understand the correlation between both cycles of distrust, the argument will be structured around the pattern of a maelstrom. This figure is helpful to understand that when the domestic cycles of distrust meet the geopolitical one, they energize each other until they merge into a single global maelstrom of distrust, which can potentially bring down democracy and the liberal world order. In 1841 Edgar Allan Poe described a maelstrom masterfully. He wrote: "The edge of the whirl was represented by a broad belt of gleaming spray; but no particle of this slipped into the mouth of the terrific tunnel, whose interior, as far as the eye could fathom it, was a smooth, shining, and jet black wall of water, inclined to the horizon at an angle of some forty-five degrees, speeding dizzily round and round with a swaying and sweltering motion, and sending forth to the winds an appalling voice, half shriek, half roar, such as not even the mighty cataract of Niagara ever lifts up in its agony to Heaven."

McLuhan found the pattern of the maelstrom to be especially powerful and often used Edgar Allan Poe's story, *The Descent into the Maelstrom*, as an example of how modern people can recognize complex patterns amid the overwhelming deluge of information they are faced with. He suggested that 'it is how we perceive and react to cataclysmic environmental changes that will determine their ultimate psychic and social consequences', and added that 'if we refuse to see them, we will become their servants (...), but if we keep our cool during the descent into the maelstrom, studying the process, we can come through'. <sup>41</sup> In Poe's story, a fisherman was caught in a

deadly whirlpool and faced certain death but ultimately saved his life by observing the pattern of the maelstrom and understanding how it operates.<sup>42</sup>

To preserve democracy and the liberal world order, democratic governments, as Poe's fisherman, must understand the expansive and cohesive nature of the threat of distrust. A vicious cycle is active at the geopolitical level. Several vicious cycles are active at the domestic level. All these cycles feed each other, and so do media and social media. Unregulated or poorly regulated AI will further accelerate this multi-dimensional downward spiral. Only by observing its pattern and mechanics, will democracies be able to safely navigate their social bodies away from it. The analysis of the global maelstrom of distrust is structured in three levels:

- 1. **Distrust within geopolitics:** This dimension constitutes the 'edge of the whirl' of the global maelstrom of distrust. It draws on neorealist, liberal and constructivist doctrines and focuses on great power competition and the battle between democracy and autocracy.
- 2. Distrust within domestic politics: This dimension constitutes the 'mouth of the tunnel' of the global maelstrom of distrust. It mostly draws on sociology and history and focuses on democratic backsliding, particularly the rise of polarization and illiberalism in democracies.
- 3. Distrust, the public sphere and the media and ICT landscape: This dimension constitutes 'the hidden core' of the global maelstrom of distrust. It mostly draws on communications theory, democratic deliberation theory and political philosophy and focuses on the problem of distrust in democracies in relation with the impact of media, social media and AI on the public sphere.

# Distrust Within Geopolitics: "The Edge of The Whirl;" Great Power Competition and The Battle of Democracy and Autocracy.

Trust and distrust play a central role in international relations. Diplomacy, multilateralism and international law require and enable trust among States. The rules-based international order in itself is a liberal architecture of trust. As argued by Richard Haass, the world order is liberal in the sense that it was to be based on the rule of law and respect for countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity. Human rights were to be protected and institutions like the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system were developed. The liberal world order was designed after WWII to prevent great wars between major powers, along philosophical principles that can loosely be traced back to Kant's perpetual peace. At least on paper, the liberal world order was well-conceived to enable a virtuous cycle of trust and cooperation among states.

To function effectively, however, the liberal world order requires the backing of states, particularly the most powerful ones. According to most historians, the League of Nations failed, to a large extent, due to lack of participation of the U.S. <sup>45</sup> As a result, it could not prevent the rise of distrust among nations and the politics of aggression of totalitarian regimes that led to WWII. The situation and the role of the U.S. changed after the war. As argued by Professor John Ikenberry, "the United States is not just a powerful state operating in a world of anarchy. It is a producer of world order." Throughout crises and confrontations, including the entire Cold War, the modern liberal world order and the UN system have been sufficiently backed by most states. Crucially, the U.S. has most often been its bulwark. <sup>47</sup> Circumstances, however, have changed and the current situation of the liberal world order is dire. <sup>48</sup> It is suffering a clear erosion and recession, thus not enabling adequate trust and cooperation among states. <sup>49</sup>

To better understand this erosion, the paper will consider two factors that have turned the dreams of a virtuous cycle of trust and cooperation among States into a vicious cycle of distrust: a) the rise of great power competition, and b) the renewed battle between democracy and autocracy. The geopolitical cycle constitutes the edge of the whirl of the global maelstrom of distrust.

# **Great power competition: Russia, China and the West**

Distrust is embedded in geopolitics. International Relations are, to a large extent, the study of distrust among powers. This is particularly true for realist doctrines and especially for neorealism, or structural realism. This school of thought, though, is far from being monolithic. Offensive realism considers that states seek power and influence to achieve security through domination and hegemony. Defensive realism argues that the anarchical structure of the international system encourages states to maintain moderate policies to attain security. Despite the differences between authors, most neorealist scholars would agree that the international system is anarchic, that there is no credible power above the states that can compromise the system, that states cannot be certain of the intentions of other states, and that they all seek to survive and retain influence in world politics. Furthermore, structural realism has little faith in the value of multilateralism or international institutions: it considers that states have no choice but to compete with every other state for relative power, as they are locked in a zero-sum game.

As a result, the management of international distrust, for neorealism, is essentially the management of the balance of power. Therefore, any changes in this balance, at global or regional level, exacerbate competition among states and, with it, distrust. Since the end of WWII, the liberal world order has lived through different configurations of global power: bipolarity during the Cold War, unipolarity with the dissolution of the Eastern bloc and the USSR and a more fluid, complex and unstable situation since the Great Recession.<sup>52</sup> As argued by Professor Joseph Nye, the current world "is neither unipolar, multipolar, nor chaotic, it is all three at the same time."53 Ian Bremmer and Nouriel Roubini have argued that "we are now living in a G-Zero world, one in which no single country or bloc of countries has the political and economic leverage -- or the will -- to drive a truly international agenda". 54 The global balance of power has quickly changed and, as a result, competition and distrust among states has risen, bringing the geopolitical cycle of distrust to a dangerous level. To better understand these developments, the paper will consider two central elements of the changing global balance of power and their effect on geopolitical distrust: i) relations between Russia and the West, ii) the impact of China's rise.

### Relations between Russia and the West

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has ignited the geopolitical cycle of distrust, a development that has the potential of bringing down the rules based international order. This claim is based on the consideration that, even if the war is fought between an invading Russia and a defensive Ukraine, the conflict is much more than just regional.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, it has ignited distrust between Russia and the West, but also between China and the U.S.

The West is assisting Ukraine and working to contain and isolate Russia. <sup>56</sup> Its threat perception has dramatically changed, with Finland and Sweden joining NATO, Germany adopting its 'Zeitenwende', and the EU accepting Ukraine as a candidate country. <sup>57</sup> Moscow also regards the war as a conflict with the entire West. <sup>58</sup> So far, the war is geographically limited to Ukraine, but this country has historically been (and still is) a geostrategic breakwater of geopolitical tensions between western powers and the Russian or Soviet Empires, as argued among others by Mackinder. <sup>59</sup>

The sources of distrust between Moscow and its western neighbors are deeply rooted in a violent history that has seen Eastern Europe and the Balkans as the epicenter of many 19th century great power conflicts and both world wars. For these and other reasons, George Kennan, the architect of the post WWII Soviet containment strategy, cautioned in 1997 that the eastward expansion of NATO would doom democracy in Russia and ignite another Cold War. Historic geostrategic balances would be altered and distrust between the West and Russia could become unmanageable. Such expansion would have eaten at Moscow's sphere of influence, enabling the stationing of allied troops close to its borders.

NATO's expansion was energized by western distrust on Moscow's present or future military intentions towards Eastern Europe. At the same time, even if NATO is a defensive alliance, Russia's distrust towards western present or future military intentions overshadowed this reality. Indeed, Russia had consistently argued that it felt threatened by NATO's eastern expansion. Building on these warnings, Moscow has framed the invasion of Ukraine as a protective war against the West. Its aggression against Ukraine has been branded with the label of "Z", which stands for Zapad, or 'West'. In its December 2021 demands to the US and NATO (prior to the invasion), amongst other issues, Moscow had requested legally binding security guarantees that NATO would not expand further, including to

Ukraine, and that it would not deploy force or weapons in countries that had joined the alliance after May 1997. Even if these demands were possibly intended for rejection, they were reinstating a longstanding Russian view contrary to NATO's eastern expansion.<sup>61</sup> They were also based on the belief that the West had violated a commitment not to expand NATO, taking advantage of Russia's weakness after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR.<sup>62</sup> With its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has tried to assert by force a sphere of influence denied by NATO's process of expansion, past and future.

The U.S. and other European capitals may have never formally finalized a commitment not to expand the military alliance, but they understood that expanding it to countries that were former members of the Warsaw Pact, and particularly of the USSR itself, as much as it might have been a historical duty, could set relations with Russia on a problematic path. The belief, however, was that Moscow's distrust on NATO's intentions could be managed economically by trade relations and investments and politically through adequate dialogue and cooperation on strategic stability, conventional arms control and confidence building measures (CBMs).<sup>63</sup>

The post-Cold War European Security Architecture reflected this belief, which held for years. As trade and economic relations grew between the West (especially the EU) and Russia, so did dialogue and cooperation. This happened bilaterally, between the U.S. and Moscow, and between the EU and EU MS and Moscow, but also multilaterally, through the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), within the OSCE, and at the arms control committees, including the Joint Consultative Group (JCG) and the Open Skies Consultative Commission (OSCC). As NATO expanded eastwards, denying Russia's sphere of influence, however, relations soured, distrust rose and, ultimately, Moscow initiated its politics of aggression: 2008 against Georgia, 2014 against Ukraine, 2022 against Ukraine again. Increased economic interdependence and politico-military dialogue did not suffice to keep the relationship between Russia and the West afloat. Distrust ultimately overwhelmed the European Security Architecture and the post-Cold War liberal world order.

However, was the historic cycle of distrust between Moscow and the West reactivated as a direct consequence of NATOs progressive expansion into Russia's perceived sphere of influence? Or where there other issues at play? The U.S. and Russia had gone through a short 'honeymoon' after the 9-11 attacks, while Putin

was in his first term in power and Moscow supported Washington's war on terror and its campaign against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.<sup>64</sup> This East-West rapprochement happened after NATO's 1999 expansion, which means that this geostrategic movement did not derail relations between Russia and the West, even if President Yeltsin had considered it unacceptable at the time. Neither did the 2004 expansion, even if it strongly upset Russia, including by the addition of the three Baltic states into NATO.

2007 is the year when Russian distrust towards the West and particularly the U.S. became evident. President Putin gave a speech at the Munich Security Conference where he accused the U.S. of trying to create a unipolar world, with only 'one master, one sovereign'. He raised several issues, including the Iraq War. NATO expansion did not appear to be Moscow's exclusive concern, although it had remained a major issue for years. Furthermore, that same year, Russia suspended the observance of the CFE treaty. He dismantlement of Europe's post-Cold War security architecture had begun. A year later, at the Bucharest summit, Putin did complain about NATO's possible future expansion to Georgia and Ukraine. Four months later, it launched the invasion of Georgia.

In 2007-2008, Russian trust towards the West appeared to be already broken, or at least severely weakened. The color revolutions and the progressive shift of Ukraine towards the West only hardened Moscow's distrust and resolve to push back against Washington and its European allies. It took over a decade, and the illegal and brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine, for most western countries to fully understand the depth of Russia's distrust and resentment, and the magnitude of its challenge to the liberal world order. The West reacted in a way that Putin did not predict. The combination of Ukrainian resistance and Western support has so far thwarted Putin's imperialist ambitions, and partially upheld the liberal world order. It has made clear that there are consequences for the countries that attack world peace and violate the UN Charter, even if these consequences have not been able to bend the Kremlin's will, or isolate Russia. The color of the countries have not been able to bend the Kremlin's will, or isolate Russia.

At this stage, however, the East-West cycle of distrust appears to be almost unbreakable. NATO's eastern expansion is a central factor of this distrust, from Moscow's perspective. Russia's aspiration to establish a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and to violently break a liberal world order that does not serve its

expansionist ambitions is the central factor, from the West's perspective. In the Global South, things are perceived very differently. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is mostly regarded as a great power conflict between Moscow and Washington, with echoes of the Cold War. As a result, aside from their clear stance against Russia's invasion at the UN's General Assembly (UNGA), most governments and societies in the region have resisted supporting Ukraine or cutting ties with Russia, even if the global implications of the invasion are clear. For a better understanding of the problem, however, all these perspectives need to be placed in the broader context of the impact of China's rise on the landscape of global power.

# The impact of China's rise on the landscape of global power

The conflict between Russia and the West cannot be fully understood unless it is placed in the context of a potentially larger conflict between the U.S. and China. The cycle of distrust between Moscow and the West is correlated and reinforced by a second cycle of distrust between Beijing, Washington and its Asian allies. This second cycle of distrust has been activated by the shifting global balance of power. The U.S. does not hold anymore the hegemony it used to since the end of the Cold War. At the same time, Beijing's power has risen dramatically in the economic, political, technological and military spheres, and can be considered a peer of Washington on key accounts of global power, or a strategic competitor.<sup>71</sup>

China is the rising power, the country that is changing the global landscape of power. Without Beijing's backing or acquiescence, Russia would not have been in a position to confront the West. Putin confirmed this stance at his meeting with Xi Jinping ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony in February 2022, where they described the relationship between both countries as a friendship with no limits and no forbidden areas of cooperation. He Kremlin can challenge the U.S., NATO and the EU, albeit mostly indirectly. It can invade neighboring countries, engage in hybrid warfare, disinformation, and election interference. It can destabilize and even trigger a nuclear conflict. But it does not have the power to 'create anew'. It cannot defeat the West. Moscow needed and still needs Beijing's backing or acquiescence.

The size of Russia's economy is similar to Italy's (even if, when measured in PPP, it is closer to Germany's, and it has proven to be particularly resilient to sanctions).<sup>75</sup> The transatlantic alliance has proved to be economically and militarily more

powerful than Russia, although it still must show its mid- and long-term resilience. As argued by James Dobbins, Howard J Shatz and Ali Wyne, "Russia is a rogue, not a peer." The rise of China, on the other hand, is perceived as a more fundamental challenge by the U.S. The new National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS) prioritize China and the Indo-Pacific, even if the former was published almost eight months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This appeared to signal that "the U.S. will not allow other crisis to derail the strategic prioritization of the Indo-Pacific and competition with China."

The rise of China is at the center of Washington's concerns. Harvard Kennedy School Professor Graham Allison has argued that this geopolitical change is resulting in increased structural tensions between Washington and Beijing, as a result of both powers being locked in Thucydides' trap.<sup>79</sup> .This concept refers to the 5th-century B.C. History of the Peloponnesian War, when ancient Athenian historian and military general Thucydides posits, "it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable."<sup>80</sup> Joe Nye, however, has warned that the U.S. should not overestimate Chinese power, which may have peaked already.<sup>81</sup> In his view, Washington has long-term advantages over China, even more so when considering the economic power of its allies. Despite these advantages, the U.S. increasingly regards Beijing as a peer competitor, economically, militarily and technologically.<sup>82</sup> At the same time, Beijing believes that Washington is striving to contain and rollback its power, and to isolate it internationally.<sup>83</sup>

To consolidate its international position and gather support from the Global South, China has engaged in important economic international initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) or the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).<sup>84</sup> The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is centered on security cooperation and has expanded to joint military exercises, includes most of the Asian territory. Furthermore, it has developed with Russia the most consequential non-declared alliance in the world.<sup>85</sup> The U.S., in return, is stepping up the ante. It has done so economically, with the CHIPS Act 2022 or the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), diplomatically, with the promotion of AUKUS (Australia, UK and U.S.) and the QUAD (U.S., Australia, India and Japan), and militarily, with the creation of new military bases in the region and the support to the rearmament of its Asian allies, particularly Japan and the Philippines.<sup>86</sup>

The rise of China and its impact on the global landscape of power has activated a powerful cycle of distrust between Washington and Beijing. What this entails, and whether it is manageable, is debated. Policy makers and scholars are striving to define the new paradigm. Abrams and Hirsch, amongst others, consider that the world has clearly entered a new Cold War.<sup>87</sup> Abrams argues that the U.S. faces challenges to its interests that are growing each year and may actually be greater than those of the 20th century: "that is the risk presented when a fully rearmed, aggressive Russia and a rich, aggressive, and technologically advanced China tell us that the international order that has lasted since 1945 must end, and American predominance with it."

Others consider that the paradigm of the Cold War does not apply to the present situation, as the situation of the global landscape of power and the rivalry between the U.S. and China is very different from that between the U.S. and the USSR. Most importantly, the Soviet Union was excluded from the rest of the global economy behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, while China is currently the main trading power of a still globalized economy, and neither the U.S. nor the EU can easily decouple from Beijing. Graham Allison considers that, even if "fundamental and irresolvable differences in values and interests compel the United States and China to be formidable rivals, this does not mean a hot war is a viable option."89 In his view, the U.S. and China are locked in a classic "Thucydidean rivalry," albeit in conditions defined by two contradictory imperatives: to compete in the greatest rivalry of all time, and to cooperate for each to ensure its own survival.<sup>90</sup> Kupchan argues that bipolarity is back, and that competition between the U.S. and China is better portrayed by the term 'Cold Peace'. According to Mark Leonard, Washington is drawing on its experience from the Cold War and trying to revamp the alliances and institutions that helped it defeat the USSR. Beijing, in the meantime, is betting that U.S. efforts will be futile, as the world has entered a state of disorder that excludes the possibility of forming Cold-War style blocs. 92

All of these arguments are valid. However, bearing in mind legitimate caveats and nuances, the argument of this paper is that, as argued by Allison, China and the U.S. are currently locked in Thucydides' trap, but also, that this situation is leading to a new Cold War. Both possibilities are fully compatible. The new Cold War has not yet fully crystallized, but it is quickly taking shape. It may still lose strength and evolve into a "thaw", as announced by President Biden. The need of cooperation may prevail over the pressures towards competition and confrontation. Hugh the strength and confrontation. Hugh the strength are the strength and evolve into a "thaw", as announced by President Biden.

both domestic and geopolitical reasons, distrust between Washington and Beijing will most likely remain at very high levels and shake bilateral efforts to lower tensions.

As happened during the Cold War, distrust and rivalry between the two greatest world powers will shape geopolitics for decades to come. It has already produced a seismic shift. The changing landscape of power has brought Moscow and Beijing closer than ever, due to strategic and ideological reasons. This runs against the historic rivalry between both countries. China and Russia are challenging U.S. power and the liberal world order. Washington and its allies are cooperating to contain or rollback their revisionist power. True, the Global South is abstaining from taking sides, and this is still an important (relative) difference with the past Cold War. But some southern capitals could tip the balance if they did. For the time being, many perceive the confrontation between the West and Russia as the preamble of the potentially more destabilizing competition between the U.S. and its allies and China.

Like in the Cold War between the U.S. and the USSR, the current geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China is unstable and prone to military escalation. A possible military crisis over Taiwan looms on the horizon.<sup>98</sup> Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shown that powerful autocracies can be ready to initiate wars despite western assumptions about the irrationality of such behavior. As happened during the lowest levels of the Cold War, trust among the great powers is broken or severely eroded. As a result, the existing competition could slide towards a hot great power war.<sup>99</sup> There are reasons to believe that a U.S.-China war could even erupt sooner than expected. General Minihan, who heads the Air Force's Air Mobility Command, wrote in an internal memo, circulated on social media, to the leadership of its 110,000 members, that President Xi Jinping "secured his third term and set his war council in October 2022. Taiwan's presidential elections are in 2024 and will offer Xi a reason. United States' presidential elections are in 2024 and will offer Xi a distracted America. Xi's team, reason, and opportunity are all aligned for 2025." 100 As in the Cold War, nuclear deterrence and the paradigm of M.A.D. may prevent this from happening, but the risk of nuclear escalation is alive. <sup>101</sup>

At the same time, the new Cold War that is taking shape is certainly very different from the previous one between the Eastern and Western blocs. The world's balance of power is more complex, the Global South weighs much more in terms of relative power, relationships and rivalries are multilayered, and the stakes are more unpredictable. Furthermore, the new Cold War in the making is so far asymmetric, unlike the previous one. This is so because there are two distinct conflict dyads, two distinct sets of opposing blocs and two primal geopolitical cycles of distrust, instead of only one. One conflict dyad opposes the West and Russia and the second one the U.S. and its Asian allies and China. The West is united as a single NATO bloc against Russia. <sup>102</sup> The competition with China, though, is very different, as it is a priority for the U.S., but continental Europe is more reluctant to adopt a confrontational stance vis--vis Beijing. This asymmetry between both conflict dyads poses challenges to the transatlantic strategy, but it can also be useful to set some global guardrails in the power competition between the U.S. and China.

Keeping stable relations is important for China and the EU, given the magnitude of their economic and commercial relationship. European countries are more aware than ever of the geopolitical risks derived from an economic dependency on China, as the energetic dependency from Russia has shown. HR/VP Borrell has clearly talked about the need for the EU to confront the reality of its three main external dependencies (energetic with Russia, economic with China and security with the U.S.). 103 Even if the new geopolitical direction may be clear, and trust between Brussels and other European capitals and Beijing is scarce, the economic repercussions of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in Europe have made it more difficult to decouple from China. Despite rising distrust, the EU and China must keep their economic relationship afloat out of mutual dependency. As decoupling is not possible, so far, the EU and the U.S. seem to agree on a more limited goal, which is that of 'de-risking' the relationship with China and promote 'friend shoring' strategies. 104 The positive side effect of this more limited approach is that it may prevent further economic damage, while retaining more leverage to prevent Beijing from getting even closer to Moscow, or at least delay this risk. 105

However, the asymmetric Cold War in the making could quickly evolve in a very dangerous direction. It could evolve into a Great Cold War if China and the U.S. escalate their confrontation, as such developments would most likely contribute to a merging of both conflict dyads into a single one. Under such a scenario, the EU would likely follow the U.S. more closely to contain Beijing, and a bloc including the West and its Asian allies would be facing another bloc consisting of China, Russia and their partners, with few or irrelevant asymmetries. A Great Cold War

could see tensions rise and bring the world dangerously close to a possible military confrontation. This scenario, undesired for all parties, could lose steam if the current efforts of dialogue between the U.S. and China are not derailed by any unfortunate development, such as the "silly balloon" incident of February 2023.<sup>106</sup>

The changing landscape of global power has ignited the geopolitical cycle of distrust. As has been explained, the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the Eastern expansion of NATO, and Russia's military build-up and aggression has reactivated the historical cycle of distrust between the West and Moscow. The rise of China, its aspiration to become Asia's hegemonic power, and Washington's push-back, has energized the cycle of distrust between China and the U.S. and its Asian allies. The central position of the U.S. within both cycles of distrust and the undeclared alliance between Russia and China has contributed to merge both cycles of distrust into a single geopolitical cycle of distrust.

The origins of this single geopolitical cycle of distrust are partly rooted in great power competition, but not only. An ideological battle is also feeding it, at a deeper level. The ideologic dimension is necessary to fully understand the reasons behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the decided Western reaction. It is also necessary to better understand the partnership between Moscow and Beijing. Rather than trying to balance a rising China, Russia has accepted to become its junior partner, in a maneuver that goes against a longstanding policy since the Tsars. Putin seems to be more worried about the immediate stability of his regime, the protection and expansion of his nationalist project, and democracy in general, than about possible future military buildups across the borders of Russia.

# The renewed battle between democracy and autocracy

The new Cold War in the making has a deep ideological component. There is a long-term competition between democracy and autocracy, which has been activated by the renewed great power rivalry. Powerful autocracies distrust powerful democracies, as the latter defend a world order that interferes with their interests and undermines their legitimacy. Powerful democracies distrust powerful autocracies, as the latter push to change, erode or overthrow the westernled liberal world order. An ideological competition feeds the power rivalry, and vice versa. The new Cold War in the making is taking the shape of a battle between democracy and autocracy.

This battle constitutes the key element that has merged the U.S.-China cycle of distrust and the Western-Russia cycle of distrust into a single geopolitical cycle of distrust which is enabling the new Cold War in the making. The process is not yet completed, because even if ideology matters, it is not the only force at play: strong economic and commercial interests, namely in Europe, but also in the U.S. and China, are acting as headwinds of the battle between democracy and autocracy. The compatibility between political regimes is a central element of international relations, but not the only one. As was analyzed in the previous section, power matters, raw interests matter, not only ideology. Interests, ideology and morals can be combined in very diverse ways. <sup>110</sup> Currently, globalization is pushing in one direction, and the geopolitical cycle of distrust in the opposite one. Globalization has been dominant for over two decades. The geopolitical cycle of distrust is the novel element, the unwelcome guest to the process of rethinking the world order.

Absent the ideological component, there would be no single geopolitical cycle of distrust. Russia and China would not have formed their undeclared alliance, and Washington would not have succeeded in rallying its European and Asian democratic allies to push back against autocratic efforts to undermine the liberal world order. The ideological component, however, is present. Security, prosperity, and the protection of the liberal world order are the paramount objectives of the transatlantic alliance and the relationship between the U.S. and its Asian allies. But ideological affinity, or democracy, is the enabler, or 'glue', as it facilitates trust among diverse countries. Security, prosperity and the transformation of the world order into a friendly environment for autocracies are the paramount objectives of Russia and China. Ideological affinity, or autocracy, is the enabler, as it allows two great powers with competing geopolitical interests to work together against liberal democracy. This section of the paper will cover two dimensions of the battle between democracy and autocracy: i) the roots of distrust, ii) the autocratic offensive.

# The roots of distrust between democracies and autocracies

On March 26, 2022, U.S. President Biden remarked that "we emerged anew in the great battle for freedom: a battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force. In this battle, we need to be clear-eyed. This battle will not be won in days or months either. We need to steel ourselves for the long fight ahead." 111

This framing has been criticized by several analysts, pointing to its inaccuracies. 112 Some, coming from a neorealist perspective, consider that ideology is not the main issue at play in the conflict between Moscow and Kyiv, nor the main motivation of Washington either. In their view, the main driver would be security and power. Others argue that many democracies, particularly in the Global South, are neither working to isolate Russia, nor siding with the West and Ukraine. An incorrect framing of the conflict could complicate its resolution, making it intractable. 113

In essence, however, and despite the possible inaccuracies and inconveniences of the 'democracy versus autocracy' framing, President Biden was correct. When power, security, and the definition of the world order are at play, the longstanding ideological competition and distrust between democracy and autocracy naturally arise at the apex of global power. The changed and changing landscape of power has reignited this ideological competition between the great powers. It happened in the 1930's, during the Cold War, and it is happening again.

President Biden is not alone in the understanding that there is a conflict between democracy and autocracy. President Zelensky has consistently framed the Ukrainian self-defense battle as one being motivated by the desire of independence, freedom and democracy. On February 22, 2023, Ukraine's Foreign Minister Kuleba said, during an event at the Harvard Kennedy School, "freedom is what makes Ukraine part of the West". Similarly, the EU's new Strategic Compass describes a "competition of governance systems accompanied by a real battle of narratives." Most European leaders see the conflict in a similar fashion. This is the main reason why Ukraine has been given the candidate country status in the EU. Ukraine's resistance is perceived as a courageous war effort that is protecting Europe, its stability, prosperity and democracy.

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power is essential to understand the ideological dimension of modern-day international relations. It has been described through the following example: "when one country gets other countries to want what it wants might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants". Soft power would be non-coercive, and it includes culture, political values and foreign policy. Nye also asserts that, "seduction is always more effective than coercion, and many values like democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are deeply seductive." The soft power of democracy has enabled the clear alignment of U.S. and European countries to

provide assistance to Ukraine and push back against Russia.

Democracy and human rights being seductive presents a key challenge for autocracies, though. The fall of communism and the collapse of the USSR, perceived by Putin as the worst geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, did not come as a result of military defeat. The implosion took place mostly from within. As argued by Larisa Deriglazova, "most experts tend to believe that the dissolution of the USSR was a natural process that could not be prevented and that the Soviet collapse was the result of internal contradictions." These internal contradictions, however, became evident in contrast with lifestyle in the West. Diana Viliers Negroponte explains that Glasnost (opening) encouraged the publication of critical letters in Izvestia, Pravda, and on Russian television: "This greater freedom of expression combined with the lifting of the ban on Western radio broadcasts allowed Soviet citizens to both criticize their own government and learn about national movements for freedom in Eastern Europe." 19

The press and the TV, as much as communist economic and political sclerosis and western technological superiority, made this possible. These mediums channeled the values and lifestyle of the West, which acted as a lighthouse of democracy in a bipolar world. The PRC received its own warning about the seductive power of democracy and human rights during the 1989 Tiananmen protests, which it brutally crushed. The magnetic influence of Western soft power was a decisive element to win the Cold War. Hard power contained the USSR. Soft power defeated it.

Soft power, though, is bivalent. As Angelo Codevilla observed, an oftenoverlooked essential aspect of soft power is that different parts of populations are
attracted or repelled by different things, ideas, images, or prospects. Soft power
is hampered when policies, culture, or values repel others instead of attracting
them. 123 Autocrats have good reasons to distrust democracies, as they promote
democracy and human rights and, in doing so, challenge their rule. 124 Autocracies
also possess soft power, although it is based on very different values and ideals as
democracies. Liberal democracies are founded on the notion of universal human
rights, and particularly on the values of freedom and political equality. Autocracies
value order above all else, dictatorial or elitist, and are ready to use force and
violence to crash political dissent. Freedom, political equality and universal human
rights are incompatible with authoritarian rule.

This conflictive political reality is well exemplified by the downward turn of relations between the West and Russia. As was argued before, NATOs eastern expansion was a major source of rising distrust between Moscow and the West, but not the only one. After being one of the strongest supporters of the U.S. after 9-11, Putin turned around, deciding that Washington had disrespected Russia and was unreliable. As David Ignatius has explained, the declassification of documents from the George W. Bush Administration has shown that the Russian-American counterterrorism alliance ruptured after the attacks by Chechen separatists on a school in Beslan in 2004, where 333 people were killed; "In the aftermath, Putin blamed the United States for encouraging the separatists by offering asylum to 'moderate' Chechens and urging Russia to negotiate with them." (...) "We never got back on track" after the Beslan incident, argued Thomas Graham, who was Bush's National Security Council senior director for Russia at the time. "Putin concluded (wrongly in the U.S. view) that the U.S. counterterrorism campaign was just a smokescreen to cover American geopolitical advance in Eurasia at Russia's expense." 125

Putin lost trust on the U.S., and this perception was later aggravated by the evolution of internal politics in Ukraine, the color revolutions, and the perception of Western involvement. Everything went downhill from there. The U.S. had established a solid relationship with Russia, based on pragmatism and a common interest of fighting international terrorism. This can be called a clear example of realpolitik. But this relationship came off the rails by the internal mechanics of two radically different political systems and traditions. What is ordinary in a liberal democracy can be considered hostile by an illiberal pseudo-democracy, an anocracy, or an authoritarian regime. Moscow could not understand the concession of asylum to a Chechen leader by the U.S. (or the award of a federally funded fellowship) but in the framework of a political decision to undermine Russia. A solid partnership between a liberal democracy and an illiberal government couldn't work indefinitely, particularly if both were great powers with diverging geopolitical interests. The inner mechanics of their respective political systems would sooner or later drive them apart, as real understanding and trust were unachievable.

The invasion of Ukraine took place against the backdrop of this distrust. A hypothetical future NATO expansion to Ukraine can be perceived by the Kremlin as a potential military threat to Russia, as Moscow has often stated and as was already analyzed. However, the ideological dimension and, more concretely, the democracy vs. autocracy paradigm, in the context of the reality of Russian nationalism, appears

to be a more decisive factor. On July 12, 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin published an essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." He wrote: "During the recent Direct Line, when I was asked about Russian-Ukrainian relations, I said that Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole," (...), and added "the wall that has emerged in recent years between Russia and Ukraine, between the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space (...) is also the result of deliberate efforts by those forces that have always sought to undermine our unity (...), the overarching goal being to divide and then to pit the parts of a single people against one another (...)." 127

Ukraine's willingness to move towards the West, towards the EU and NATO, represented (and still does) a major ideological threat to nationalist Russia's conception of itself. Ukraine's independence, self-determination and democratic evolution was (and still is) the main challenge to an autocratic Russia. NATO's possible expansion to Ukraine basically consolidated that threat. From the perspective of western democracies, Russia's aggression is unacceptable in itself and as a consequence of the threat that it constitutes to the main tenets of the UN Charter. In helping Ukraine, the West is also aiming to protect European security, democracy and the entire liberal world order. The ideological element is central to both sides.

Beijing and Moscow have understood the problem that Western liberal democratic soft power poses to their regimes and have acted in consequence. Defensively, autocracies have closed their public spheres, which had become increasingly permeated by the Internet and the spread of liberal and democratic ideas. The development of the Great Firewall of China is one of the most relevant steps of this authoritarian inward, protective, shift. <sup>128</sup> This shift has been particularly evident since the financial and economic crisis of 2007-2008, which showed cracks in Western power, resilience and credibility. <sup>129</sup> When power and the definition of the rules of the game are at stake, the clash between (powerful) democracies and (powerful) autocracies is unavoidable. The democratic peace theory only applies to relations between democracies. <sup>130</sup> The changed and changing landscape of global power has reopened the centuries-old battle between democracy and autocracy and enabled the formation of a single geopolitical cycle of distrust.

### The autocratic offensive

In the context of this renewed ideological battle, Russia and China have turned increasingly to the offensive. For years, their official narratives have denounced what they call Western interference and double standards. Their use of international fora to remind States of Western military interventions, including in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya, is coupled with the criminalization of the use of sanctions by the West, or of political statements on electoral crises and human rights violations. Russia and China present themselves as non-interventionist actors in the global sphere, consistently respectful of other countries' sovereignty and independence, as opposed to the West.

In theory, Moscow should have lost all credibility in the wake of its 2008 aggression against Georgia, 2014 against Ukraine, its intervention later in Syria to support Assad, and its unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine since 2022. The Wagner Group's presence and interference in the domestic affairs of African countries added to Moscow's interventionist offensive. One of Russia's most common talking points is that the West has done worse things globally. This argument is often effective to keep many countries in the Global South from effectively 'taking sides' against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Beyond their votes at the UNGA, most are not keen on supporting Ukraine militarily or economically, or isolating Russia.

Beijing is directly sponsoring its model of autocracy, which it calls 'socialist democracy,' across the world, labeling it as a superior form of rule than liberal democracy. The PRC can present the outstanding economic success of having lifted hundreds of millions of citizens out of poverty in an incredibly short timeframe, and contrast it with Western economic, social and political troubles since the Great Recession. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not only a massive project of infrastructure development and economic expansion, but also a massive investment on public diplomacy. The ideological challenge of Russia and China against Western liberal democracy is real, and central to these countries strategies to erode and dismantle -in Moscow's case- or change -in Beijing's case-the liberal world order. Both countries want to move away from a world order that keeps the protection and promotion of universal human rights at its center. In their view, this model represents an outdated system of Western democratic domination, conceived to weaken and threaten their rule.

Hybrid warfare is a central element of Russia's and China's offensive against democracies and includes a decisive ideological component. Political and social stability across the world, including in the West, is targeted, particularly by Moscow. Its actions have included electoral interference and disinformation campaigns. Decaying trust in democracy and political polarization are perceived as strategic vulnerabilities of democracies, their real "Achilles heel", as will be further analyzed in the next section. Russia and China are leaving no stone unturned to erode Western unity and its reputation in the world. They consider that, this time, they can win the ideological battle against the West, partly because they perceive Western soft power as being in decay, and they actively sponsor this narrative. Power as being in decay, and they actively sponsor this narrative.

"There are at least two Wests," Putin has said. One, he has said, is a West of "traditional, mainly Christian values" with which Russians feel kinship. But, in his view, "there's another West — aggressive, cosmopolitan, neocolonial, acting as the weapon of the neoliberal elite," and trying to impose its "pretty strange" values on the rest of the world. These words fit into a pattern of actions, that confirms that Russia also believes that there's an existential battle between democracy and autocracy. From Moscow's perspective, though, the liberal West is 'aggressive, cosmopolitan, neocolonial, acts as the weapon of the neoliberal elite and tries to impose its "pretty strange" values on the rest of the world'. Russia, on the other side, is traditional and inspired by Christian values, just like 'the other West'.

For Putin, Russia is on the democratic side of the battle, and the West in the authoritarian one. Already in June 2007 he said: "Of course, I am an absolute, pure democrat. But you know the problem? It's not even a problem, it's a real tragedy. The thing is that I am the only one, there just aren't any others in the world." Putin, like Xi Jinping, has consistently claimed his country to be a democracy, 'with its own traditions of national self-government, and not the realization of standards foisted on us from outside.' He has also consistently attacked the West and questioned its democratic credentials, and even more so after his invasion of Ukraine, which was partly framed as a crusade against Nazism. But Putin has also made clear that there are 'at least two Wests'. One is an enemy, but the other one can be a friend. In his view, there's a West 'of traditional, mainly Christian values', that Russians feel kinship with.

This perspective, rather than being dismissed as a propaganda effort to sow divisions in the West, must be analyzed, as it provides an insight into Moscow's strategy. It is necessary to determine whether there are 'at least two Wests', and what this means. This question connects the geopolitical cycle of distrust with the analysis of democracies' domestic cycles of distrust, particularly in the U.S. This analysis is essential because, together, the geopolitical and domestic cycles of distrust have formed the global maelstrom of distrust that can bring down democracy and the liberal world order.

## Distrust Within Domestic Politics: "The Mouth of The Tunnel;" The Crisis of Liberal Democracy and The Rise of Polarization and Illiberalism

Trust within geopolitics is shaped by three dimensions: power, ideology, and interpersonal relations. The previous section of the paper has focused on power relations and ideology, and only anecdotally on interpersonal relations. However, these constitute an essential element of trust at every level of human relations, including geopolitics. Trust or distrust among Presidents, Prime Ministers and Ministers of Foreign Affairs shape international relations. Trust or distrust among Ambassadors and diplomats in general modulate cooperation in multilateral organizations and bilateral relations. Have presented in trust is the essence of any form of trust, but it is constrained by structural factors, such as power and ideological competition.

Within these constraints, interpersonal trust between political leaders can make an important difference, for good and for bad. For instance, the current geopolitical cycle of distrust is partly enabled by the existing distrust between the political leadership of the great powers, particularly the Presidents of the U.S. and the Russian Federation. Constraints on interpersonal trust between leaders, however, are not only geopolitical, but also domestic. Trump, for instance, could not fully develop his proclaimed aim of improving relations with Russia to undermine the liberal world order, as a consequence of international and domestic factors, including opposition by the Democratic Party. During his presidency, he tried to remove those constraints. Now, domestic politics might also complicate President Biden's efforts to move towards a "thaw" in relations with China. Now, China.

In democracies, foreign policy is always constrained by domestic and electoral politics, and governments' margins of maneuver are limited. Besides, political competition generates a frequent democratic "swing of the pendulum", which autocracies and many other actors, foreign and domestic, try to manipulate in their favor. Trump's reversal of Obama's foreign policy achievements, on climate change, Iran or Cuba, are recent examples. The role of lobbies and electoral politics are better indicators of these reversals than foreign policy considerations. As

Tip O' Neill, former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, used to say, "all politics is local." <sup>148</sup>

Given the centrality of domestic realities in all politics, including geopolitics, the next part of the paper will focus on a particular type of structural constraint on the foreign policy of democratic countries: the impact of rising distrust. Even if this rise can be traced back several decades, its effects have only become evident in the last decade, and more concretely in 2016, year of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. Rising distrust within democracies has been feeding a spiral of political polarization and illiberalism, a phenomenon that is in the radar of autocracies. Distrust in democracy is a severe democratic vulnerability, the "Achilles heel" of democracies in the battle with autocracy. Russia and China are exploiting this vulnerability through hybrid warfare and disinformation.

As a result, the domestic cycles of distrust within democracies and the geopolitical cycle of distrust between great powers are generating powerful feedback loops amongst each other. These cycles have been synchronized and, together, they have formed the global maelstrom of distrust. The geopolitical cycle may be the most visible, but it only constitutes the edge of the whirl. Below it, the domestic cycles of distrust form the mouth of the tunnel of the maelstrom. The analysis of distrust within domestic democratic politics will focus on two issues: i) democratic vulnerability to autocratic interference, ii) rising polarization and illiberalism.

## Democratic vulnerability to autocratic interference.

In 1858, after accepting the Illinois Republican Party's nomination as the state's US senator, Abraham Lincoln said "a House divided against Itself cannot stand". This concept is ancient wisdom. The inner life of political entities (Republics, Empires, States or Nation-States) is a central factor of geopolitics. It was the case in the 19th century, when Abraham Lincoln presided over the greatest crisis in U.S. history, and it is now. During the American Civil war, every other nation was officially neutral, and none formally recognized the Confederacy. American weakness during its Civil war did not come without severe consequences in the international arena, though. 153

The inner life of modern States is a central factor of present-day geopolitics too. <sup>154</sup> Today, the changing landscape of global power has revitalized the secular battle between democracy and autocracy. This confrontation, though, finds liberal

democracies in a precarious situation.<sup>155</sup> Many are experiencing historically high and very concerning levels of distrust and political polarization, which is undermining democratic governance. Democracy has been in retreat worldwide, even more so since the Great Recession, and even advanced Western democracies are suffering the consequences.<sup>156</sup>

Certainly, not only democracies face internal challenges. Autocracies are generally more unstable. The collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the USSR is a good historic example. Color revolutions, or the Arab Spring, have taken root mostly within autocracies, not in liberal democracies. As argued by David Brooks, "government against the people is a recipe for decline." 157 The questioning of its flawed legitimacy is destabilizing for authoritarian regimes. Bruce Schneier and Henry Farrell, for instance, contrast the stability of democracies and autocracies through the lens of information security. 158 As they explain, "autocracies do not require common political knowledge about the efficacy and fairness of elections, and strive to maintain a monopoly on other forms of common political knowledge": "they actively suppress common political knowledge about potential groupings within their society, their levels of popular support, and how they might form coalitions with each other." As a result, "authoritarian regimes are vulnerable to information attacks that challenge their monopoly on common political knowledge." 159 Autocracies need censorship, repression and propaganda to preserve their stability. Truth corrodes their legitimacy.

Prigozhin's recent insurrection against Putin's authority, even if short-lived, shows that stability is unpredictable in a country that is ruled by fear, corruption and propaganda. Putin's strong-man reputation has been shattered, and also his reasons to invade Ukraine. As argued by David Ignatius, "*Prigozhin told the truth flat out in the days before his march on Moscow. Ukraine didn't threaten Russia, and Russia's invasion was unnecessary — a mistake of epic proportions.*" However, it is uncertain whether the failed mutiny will leave President Vladimir Putin weakened, strengthened or vindictive. His regime may have been lethally wounded, or it may consolidate itself by turning more totalitarian.

Furthermore, as argued by Alexey Navalny, even if Ukraine achieves success against the Russian invasion, "where is the guarantee that the world will not find itself confronting an even more aggressive regime, tormented by resentment

and imperial ideas that have little to do with reality?" Putin's invasion may ultimately fail, and this outcome would be desirable for Ukraine, for the West, for the liberal world order and for Russia itself. Putin's regime may even collapse, yet it is unclear in which direction would Russia head. The odds are, it may remain autocratic and resentful of the West, which means that both the U.S., the EU and its Member States, and other allies, must still prepare themselves for the new Cold War, and strengthen their democratic resilience.

China is also facing very relevant domestic challenges: political, economic, and demographic, amongst others. <sup>163</sup> But the reality of Russia's troubles and the possibility of "peak China" do not imply that the perspectives for democracies are necessarily excellent. Autocratic instability does not undermine the arguments to reinforce democratic resilience, it strengthens them. The reason is that, if autocracies feel strong, and perceive democracies to be vulnerable, they will interfere and try to destabilize them. If autocracies feel weak, yet perceive democracies to be vulnerable, they might double down on interference, out of resentment and desperation. If autocracies collapse, the ripple effects may further destabilize democracies. The aftermath of the Arab Spring and the civil wars in Libya or Syria, which generated a massive flow of refugees into Europe, is a case in point. <sup>164</sup>

There is only one scenario which reduces these threats: increased democratic resilience. If democracies are strong, stable, cohesive, and generally trusted by their citizens, autocracies will detect a steep reduction in their vulnerability to foreign interference. As a result, their incentives to engage in hybrid warfare and disinformation will be reduced. At the same time, their incentives to find avenues of cooperation will increase. Gorbachev's reforms, for instance, happened against the backdrop of a Soviet perception that the U.S. was powerful and stable and Cold War tensions had to be reduced if Moscow wanted to focus on internal reconstruction. <sup>165</sup> Furthermore, stable and resilient democracies are logically more able to cope with crises, including those originated by autocracies' collapse.

Increasing democratic resilience is the path to regain domestic and geopolitical trust and stability, but the current domestic situation of democracies is far from optimal. In the West, distrust and polarization are extremely high. Information corrodes autocracy, but disinformation corrodes democracy, and disinformation is rampant nowadays. The "battle between democracy and autocracy" is not only

taking place between great powers, but also within democracies. The attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021, epitomizes the domestic autocratic threat. In the U.S., President Biden has named the struggle between democracy and autocracy "the battle for the Soul of the Nation." Democratic backsliding has made progress throughout the world and is re-shaping some democracies into autocracies or anocracies. Developments in Hungary, Poland, Turkey, India, or Israel, to name just a few, are known examples of democratic backsliding. 168

Anocracies, regimes which are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic (they may run elections, but rights and freedoms, like the freedom of the press, are curtailed), are actually the most volatile political regimes. As argued by Barbara F. Walter, compared with democracies, anocracies with more democratic than autocratic features are three times more likely to experience political instability or civil war. Autocracies and anocracies deprive people from some or most of their rights, including the right to political equality, which is the foundation of liberal democracy. Unless are uninterested in preserving the liberal world order as is, and would rather dismantle the international humans right system. Hence, democratic backsliding is not only a domestic political development, it is a major geopolitical development.

Rising distrust within democracies, particularly in the U.S. and the EU, constitutes the "mouth of the tunnel" of the global maelstrom of distrust. The U.S. domestic cycle of distrust influences democratic politics worldwide, especially in Europe and Latin America. At the same time, it also constitutes the center of gravity of the geopolitical cycle of distrust. The reason is that all geopolitical actors are taking note of rising distrust and polarization within the U.S., as it may enable the largest reshaping of the world order since the fall of the USSR, and possibly since the end of WWII.

The domestic cycles of distrust within European countries, especially in EU Member States and the UK, are also crucial. They also influence democratic politics worldwide, and they constitute a second center of gravity of the geopolitical cycle of distrust. Brexit is a case in point. All geopolitical actors are taking note of this phenomenon. This is the case particularly of Russia, that keeps feeding the European cycles of distrust, in the hope that far-right, illiberal parties, "the West that Russia can be friends with," will benefit from the situation. Moscow's hope is, ultimately, to weaken and if possible divide the EU and NATO.<sup>174</sup>

The domestic cycles of distrust in the U.S. and in EU Member States are the central tectonic plates that condition great power competition worldwide. They are "the mouth of the tunnel" of the global maelstrom of distrust. Hence, a strong, stable U.S., in alliance with a strong, stable EU and other democratic actors, are the only possible guarantors of the liberal world order. Democratic backsliding, particularly in the West, is a welcome development for autocracies, which find reasons to trust that a better world order for their interests is possible. Eroding trust and internal divisions in democracies are perceived by autocracies as vulnerabilities of liberal democracies.

China, and especially Russia, are aggressively interfering in the internal affairs of liberal democracies. This also happened in the past Cold War, but all Soviet efforts were mostly unsuccessful then. The U.S. in particular always remained strongly united internally against communism. The situation this time is different. Political polarization in the U.S. and Europe are enabling Russia's offensive. Against this troublesome background, it is difficult to deny that there are currently two Wests, as Putin claims. Most Westerners remain identified with liberal democratic principles, but a substantive portion of the Western population has lost significant trust in democratic institutions and is supporting populist and even extremist political options. Political polarization and gridlock are common currencies of contemporary democratic governance.

Moscow's hybrid warfare has already had successes. The Kremlin did interfere in the 2016 U.S. elections, and the candidate it supported was elected President. Whether Russia's interference was a decisive factor of Trump's victory, or not, is secondary. Russia learned that it could interfere in a democratic election in the most powerful country on Earth, sow chaos and divisions, see its preferred candidate elected, and pay little political price, as polarization keeps Americans divided also about Russia. As Robert Putnam has explained, "a long-term bipartisan consensus on U.S.-Russian relations was rapidly converted to mass polarization after 2016, as President Trump signaled to his base that sympathy for Russia was now the appropriate policy view." 177

There are few reasons to believe the Kremlin will not try to repeat this feat in the 2024 U.S. Presidential elections (and other European elections). In the U.S., the possible election of Trump or another illiberal populist candidate could radically change the state of international affairs. It may or may not happen, but a second

Trump Presidency could weaken and possibly break up NATO, stop Western support to Ukraine, and see Moscow's geopolitical objectives fully or partially achieved, in a way that seems unfeasible if President Biden was reelected. More importantly, the U.S. could come out more weakened and fractured from a contentious presidential election, regardless of its concrete outcome.

An isolationist turn in Washington could be the result of policies furthered by a new Administration, or of generalized political dysfunction. Either way, it would constitute the downfall of the liberal world order. The last time that the U.S. followed an isolationist foreign policy, the world order collapsed: fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan seized the opportunity to launch their politics of aggression, which led to WWII. These are enough reasons for the Kremlin to continue betting on interference. As long as the U.S. and other democracies appear to be "a house divided," autocracies will continue interfering in their affairs and aiming to subvert the liberal world order. Ultimately, the global maelstrom of distrust revolves around democracies' divisions, which enable autocratic interference. It is therefore necessary to better understand the sources of these divisions.

## Rising polarization and illiberalism

Hybrid warfare and disinformation from autocracies are not the only threats with geopolitical repercussions that are magnified by the rise of distrust and polarization in liberal democracies. The most relevant challenges arise from democracies themselves. A U.S. default due to failed debt ceiling negotiations, for instance, could be a major blow to the world economy and global stability. It has been so far averted but could happen in a future if political polarization remains so high. Likewise, if the U.S. suffered another post-election crisis after the 2024 Presidential elections, or if politically motivated violence increased, U.S. stability and the fate of the liberal world order could be seriously compromised. It is not even necessary to analyze whether worst-case scenarios (such as the eruption of massive political violence in the U.S. or even a civil war) are likely or even feasible, and what their global geopolitical repercussions would be.<sup>179</sup> Less extreme scenarios, such as the ones described, can be already extremely destabilizing, and do not seem too far-fetched anymore.

Most of these scenarios derive from domestic political dysfunction, which comes

as a result of (and is manifested in) rising distrust in government and society and increased polarization. Is there a correlation, though, between these two factors? Political philosopher Kevin Vallier considers that collapsing trust is arguably connected to increasing American political polarization, perhaps as both cause and effect. As he explains, "we can see the causal arrows running in both directions: low trust in government increases polarization, and high polarization decreases trust in government." Furthermore, he argues that there is probably a negative feedback loop between falling social and political trust and rising political polarization, which he calls the 'distrust-divergence hypothesis' (social and political distrust leads to partisan divergence, but increased trust reduces partisan divergence). <sup>181</sup>

The correlation, however, goes beyond this feedback loop. As explained by Professor Henry E. Brady, confidence in governing institutions has not only fallen but it is also politically polarized. 182 Furthermore, it also affects non-political institutions. In the U.S., as expected, there are partisan differences in confidence in political institutions (Republicans trust Republican presidents and Democrats trust Democratic presidents). 183 However, what is more striking, is that this phenomenon has increasingly affected non-political institutions: "For the Democrats, confidence is higher than for the Republicans in what we might call the knowledge-producing institutions: the press, TV news, public schools, higher education, and science. For the Republicans, confidence is higher than for the Democrats in the norm-enforcing and order-preserving institutions: religion, police, and the military." In sum: trust in both governing and non-governing institutions has declined since the 1970s, and confidence in these institutions is now more polarized. 184 This is a major challenge for democracy. As argued by Professor Brady, recent events suggest that distrusted institutions (such as police and public health) cannot be effective, and polarized trust leads to vastly different views on institutional performance and on how institutions should eventually be reformed. Given partisan differences in the evaluation of institutions, it is hard to know how they can continue to be effective when a crisis occurs. 185

The rest of the diagnostic part of the paper will draw on the "distrust-divergence hypothesis" and on findings regarding the polarization of trust to further the argument that the domestic cycles of distrust and polarization are intertwined: distrust and polarization are two sides or perspectives of the same problem. The perspective of rising social and political distrust within democracies was covered in the sections "general background" and "notions of trust". Thus, at this juncture, it

is necessary to further analyze the problem more concretely from the perspective of polarization.

Social psychologist Peter T. Coleman explains that polarization has long referred to the divergence of political attitudes toward more ideological extremes. <sup>186</sup> Distinctions can be made, however, between "affective polarization" (the tendency of members of oppositional groups to feel negatively about the opposing group members), "ideological polarization" (the divergence of attitudes on substantive issues) and "political polarization" (which refers to cases in which an individual's stance on a given issue, policy or person is more likely to be influenced by identification with a particular party or ideology, that with understanding the issue or person). <sup>187</sup>

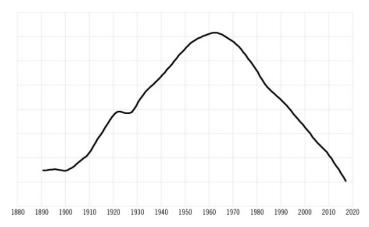
There are many theories on the origins of polarization. Peter T. Coleman divides them in three categories: a) the people story (which include neural polarization, cognitive biases and similar biological and psychological explanations); b) the group story (socialization splits individuals into in-groups and out-groups, which are easily manipulated); and c) the societal story (in large societies, people tend to locate at the top or bottom of a hierarchy, and this position affects identities and access to resources and information). 188 Peter T. Coleman argues that all of these factors "fuel each other in complex and ever-increasing ways, establishing vicious cycles." Prawing on Karl Popper's distinction between "clock problems" and "cloud problems" (the former being mechanical, predictable and controllable, and the latter irregular, disorderly and unpredictable), he concludes that polarization mostly resembles "cloud problems". 190 As a result, they cannot be fixed by administering one or more technical solutions (eg: "like bringing reds and blues together to talk"). Furthermore, he argues that when the elements that compose cloud problems "become more tightly linked or aligned", they can become "attractors", which means that they "form coherent patterns that draw us in and resist change."191

However, even if all of the above-mentioned groups of theories on the roots of polarization are correct, not all of them can fully explain the particular problem concerning the rise of polarization in the last decades. There is a clear upward trajectory that requires an explanation. The "people story" and the "group story" do not fully capture the historical dynamics of the rise and fall of polarization. For instance, cognitive biases are always present, and so are in-group and out-

group dynamics, yet societies historically present varying degrees of polarization. The "societal story" can provide a useful insight, though, as it implies that "more insolated and competitive structures and norms between groups inherently drive polarization", even more so when power struggles and scarcity of resources are added. As explained by Peter T. Coleman, "the negative emotional consequences around these divisions often accumulate over time and create volatile conditions for intergroup strife." <sup>192</sup>

In other words: individualism and competition increase polarization, while comity and cooperation reduce it. These factors help explain the fall and rise of polarization (and distrust) in the U.S. in the last century. Professor of Public Policy and former Dean of the Harvard Kennedy School Robert D. Putnam, for instance, tracing trends in the U.S. between 1895 and 2015, provides a unified statistical story and discerns a single core phenomenon: "one inverted U-curve that provides a summary of the past 125 years in America's story." He explains that this metatrend is a phenomenon that can be called "the I-We-I curve" ("I" refers to more individualistic periods, and "We" to more communitarian ones). <sup>193</sup>

Figure 1 Community Vs. Individualism in America, 1890-2017



Putnam's work shows how the U.S. was a highly unequal and individualistic society in the Gilded Age (the first "I" period), turned to ever increasing rates of equality and communitarianism up to its peak in the '50's and early 60's (the "We" period), and then fell again to highly unequal and individualistic standards all the way until the present moment (the second "I" period). <sup>194</sup> This trajectory, Putnam argues, "has been experienced in our experience of equality, our expression of democracy, our stock of social capital, our cultural identity, and our shared understanding of what this nation (the U.S.) is all about." <sup>195</sup> Levels of political polarization in the U.S.

have followed a similar trajectory. Political polarization was high during the Gilded Age, started to decrease during the Progressive Era, and reached its lowest levels during the New Deal and WWII, all the way to the 1950's. "Not until the 1970's did partisanship begin to become more intense and bipartisan collaboration rarer. The last five decades of steadily accelerating partisanship have produced the deeply polarized world in which we live today," explains Putnam.<sup>196</sup>

Putnam describes the trajectory of polarization in the US as a path "from tribalism to comity and back again". The same trajectory can be applied to trust. The US had managed to substantially 'depolarize' as American society became more equal and communitarian, but polarization resurged after 1970. The rise of individualism helps understand the rise of distrust and polarization in the U.S., but also in Europe and other advanced democracies. <sup>197</sup> Comity, cooperation and the civic dialogue they require moderate and counterbalance neural polarization, cognitive biases and in-group vs out-group competition and distrust. The depletion of these resources constitutes the main vulnerability of democracy, from a domestic or a geopolitical perspective. <sup>198</sup> The reason is that high distrust and polarization are the soil where illiberalism and authoritarianism thrive.

As argued by Jennifer L. Mc Coy and Murat Somer, "severe 'Us' vs. 'Them' polarization gives rise to illiberalism when intentionally illiberal or autocratic political leaders use polarizing strategies to divide the electorate and generate loyalty despite their illiberal actions, and when liberal political actors turn to polarizing strategies for their own electoral ambitions and become transformed by its logic." The resulting distrust, dislike, and mutual perceptions of existential threat of the two political camps incentivizes voters to tolerate or even endorse illiberalism to enhance their "sides" political position. On A consequence of this process is that, at some stage, an illiberal government can be elected. Then, as explained by Fareed Zakaria, democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been reelected or reaffirmed through referenda, routinely ignore constitutional limits on their power and deprive their citizens of basic rights and freedoms. Fareed Zakaria wrote about this problem in 1997, when the "rise of illiberal democracy" appeared to be confined to Latin America, Africa, Asia or Russia.

With the years, though, democratic backsliding expanded to some Eastern European countries, including EU Member States, such as Hungary or Poland. And, more recently, it has even affected longstanding democratic countries in the West,

including the U.S. The election of Trump in 2016 did not come out of nowhere: it was the manifestation of a decades-long process of rising distrust and polarization. Liberal democracies cannot resist these forces eternally: at some point, social and political trust is so low, social cohesion so damaged, and the public sphere so eroded, that democracy itself cannot stand. Social and political distrust end up generating electoral distrust.<sup>202</sup>

Countries in this situation may keep elections and certain formal democratic appearances but, if they persist in the trap of their domestic cycles of distrust long enough, and elect illiberal leaders that undermine political equality, at some point, 'democracy', and even 'illiberal democracy' is not the correct term to define them anymore. As argued by Wendy Brown, "political equality is democracy's foundation and when it is absent, the demos ceases to rule." Governments that deprive citizens of their basic rights and freedoms should be considered autocracies or anocracies.

Rising distrust and its twin, rising polarization, lead to democratic backsliding, illiberalism and autocracy. For several decades, the domestic cycles of distrust have generated a worldwide erosion of democracy and, with it, of the liberal world order. Aware of these developments, Russia and China have taken on the offensive. Beijing's rising assertiveness and Moscow's rising aggressiveness are incentivized by their perception of western democratic vulnerability, which implies that, in their view, the shaping of a new world order is up for grabs. The domestic and the geopolitical cycles of distrust are now intertwined. The rise of individualism, polarization and distrust within western liberal democracies constitutes the mouth of the tunnel of this global maelstrom of distrust. The next section of the paper will focus on a central aspect of this phenomenon: the role played by mass-media and digital technologies, particularly social media and AI.

# Distrust and The Public Sphere: "The Hidden Core;" The Impact of Media, Social Media and Al On Democratic Backsliding

This section of the paper will forward the argument, shared by numerous scholars, that the contemporary crisis of democracy is mainly a crisis of communication. The reason is that political trust and distrust, and the entire public sphere, have become mirror images of the media and social media landscapes, which have been undermining democracy. This implies that, if democracies want to protect their stability and the liberal world order and regain their citizens' trust, they must address the ongoing crisis of democratic communication as a matter of priority, by rebuilding their public spheres.

This argument mostly draws on research from the fields of communications theory, political philosophy and deliberative democracy. As was analyzed in the previous section, rising distrust and polarization are correlated with rising individualism and falling comity. <sup>206</sup> This section of the paper will further argue that all of these trends are mainly effects of dramatic changes in the public sphere of democracies. Comity and trust are manifestations of social psychology and are shaped within the public sphere. Hence, their erosion, and the rise of individualism, distrust and polarization, are first of all a by-product of the erosion of the public sphere.

The public sphere requires trust and generates trust. An eroded public sphere generates distrust and polarization. Hence, the public sphere can be conceived as the "central nervous system" of democracy. Its failure leads to the activation of the domestic cycles of distrust within democracies, the rise of polarization and illiberalism and, ultimately, to democracy's demise. The hidden core of the global maelstrom of distrust is constituted by the erosion and fragmentation of democracies' public spheres. The rise of authoritarianism, domestically and globally, is the result of this illness of democracy. Democratic leaders invested in the battle between democracy and autocracy must bear this reality in mind.

The notion of public sphere was thoroughly developed by German political

philosopher Juergen Habermas, who described it as "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state." As he explained, "a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body." Habermas distinguished the public sphere from the 'political public sphere', which refers to occasions when public discussion deals with objects connected to the activity of the state. For him, the public sphere was separate from the state (and from the economy), but should influence the states' policies, as it essentially was "a society engaged in critical public debate." The institutions of representative democracy should be able to listen and act up on the deliberations of citizens on matters of common interest, which expressed a public opinion. 210

Certainly, certain conditions should be met for the public sphere to effectively function. A well-functioning public sphere requires a set of rights and opportunities to ensure equal, substantive communicative freedom: a) rights (including liberty of expression and association), b) expression (equal chance to express views on issues of public concern to a public audience), c) access (good and equal access to reliable information, d) diversity (range of views on issues of public concern), and e) communicative power (capacity for sustained collective action). Some norms are also required for the political culture of a well-functioning public sphere, particularly truthfulness, the search for the common good, and the duty of civility. The respect of these rights, opportunities and norms would result in an open, free, equitable, inclusive, rational and constructive civic dialogue, based on truthful information. Aside from being a central element of democracy (and correlated to this), a well-functioning public sphere is an essential bulwark for the effective protection of human rights.

The habermasian concept of public sphere was not a complete historic novelty, though, as it was built upon the classical western idea of citizens participating in their governance through public discussion, originated in ancient Greece and Rome. The modern revival of this idea was incorporated in the liberal political theory of the eighteenth century that addressed the relations between the states and its citizens in a democracy. Its importance since then has only grown. In modern mass societies, the public sphere is considered "the theater in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk" and "the realm where public opinion can be formed and where it becomes political action. The Furthermore, it is the space where deliberative and participatory democracy can develop.

From the twentieth century, there has been increased focus on the impact of mass media upon civic practice. Habermas explained that "in a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today, newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere." Hence, the media landscape lies at the strategic center of the public sphere and of democracy itself. As Marshall McLuhan would argue, "the medium is the message." In other words: societies shape media, and then media shapes societies, public spheres and democracies.

Habermas's and McLuhan's theories were developed in the 1960's, long before the advent of digital technologies. Today, the Internet and social media have become the main mediums of communication and are shaping the public sphere of democracies, displacing journalism. Since the public sphere is nowadays mediated by digital technologies, it is often considered a "digital public sphere." In sum: nowadays, the media and social media landscape are the crucibles where democracy and human rights are being shaped, for good and for bad.

The domestic cycles of distrust are mainly "cycles of distrust" created in the "digital public spheres" of democracies. As the Internet and social media have a global dimension, very similar cycles of distrust are taking root in very diverse societies. Social media are eroding democracies' public spheres globally, deepening the synchronization between the domestic and the geopolitical cycles of distrust. Eroded and fragmented public spheres have become the "hidden core" of the global maelstrom of distrust. AI is quickly accelerating this dangerous trend, to the point that it can soon become unmanageable for democracies. The analysis of this section of the paper will focus on four issues: i) the mass media public sphere, ii) mass media and rising distrust and polarization, iii) the digital public sphere and digital and AI disruption, and iv) international competition and cooperation on digital technologies.

## The mass media public sphere

Media are essential for any modern society and for any modern form of power. They are central to democracy and to authoritarianism, as they are the primal means to legitimize their power. Authoritarian regimes need subservient media, to manipulate populations through State propaganda. Democratic regimes need free media, to check political power and contribute to protect the rights and

freedoms of the people. In liberal democracies, free media are essential to preserve democracy itself. In authoritarian regimes, subservient media are essential to preserve autocracy itself.

The media landscape forms the strategic core of the public sphere of liberal democracies. Free, independent journalism is a condition of real democracy, which is why it is constitutionally protected in most advanced democracies. It is also a central pillar of the liberal world order. The right to freedom of expression is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is a prerequisite and a driver to the enjoyment of all other human rights. The UN General Assembly proclaimed the World Press Freedom Day in December 1993.<sup>221</sup>

As a result, in liberal democracies, "freedom of the press" has been defined in relation to the social purpose of media. Unlike freedom of expression or, in the US, freedom of speech, freedom of the press is not 'purpose free', as it is meant to serve a public good (information of the citizenship) and abide by certain standards. Journalism, at its core, is a service occupation, meant to empower the populace with truth. There are around 400 codes covering journalistic work around the world. While various codes may differ in the detail of their content and come from different cultural traditions, most share common elements including the principles of truthfulness, accuracy and fact-based communications, independence, objectivity, impartiality, fairness, respect for others and public accountability.<sup>222</sup>

The development of the ethical codes and standards of journalism has been the result of historical failures of mass media towards democracies. Instead of enabling a public sphere, as the press had done in the late eighteenth century, some scholars argue that the new mass media of the twentieth often threatened to subvert the public sphere and democracy. <sup>223</sup> In their view, mass media, such as radio and TV, turned publics into crowds. The effects of this phenomenon could be seen in the rise of fascism in the 1920's and 1930's. Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset described this danger in his work "The revolt of the masses." As he said, "anybody who is not like everybody, who does not think like everybody, runs the risk of being eliminated."<sup>224</sup>

The revolt of the masses forecasted the downfall of democracies. Publics were considered to have a constructive role in societies, whereas crowds, or masses, were destructive. <sup>225</sup> In the U.S., the debate was led in the 1920's by Walter Lippman and John Dewey. The former considered the mass incapable of performing its role as a true

'public' and in need of guidance through propaganda (mass media messages) by an educated elite. Dewey, on the other hand, conceived public as the natural emergence of community efforts to solve shared problems, with solutions then institutionalized in government.<sup>226</sup>

Ever since the development of modern mass media, the public sphere has been mediated by media outlets and corporations. Professor Archon Fung, Director of the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, and Joshua Cohen, senior Director at Apple Inc Professor, name this manifestation of the public sphere the "mass-media public sphere." And ever since, there has been a debate on whether mass media's influence on the public sphere and on political trust has been positive or negative. The debate started in the 1920's and continues today.

In the 1930's, when other western liberal democracies were collapsing before the advance of fascism and Nazism, President Roosevelt understood the strategic importance of media. His Administration leveraged its influence to be able to implement the New Deal and the policies that were required to bring the U.S. out of the disaster of the Great Depression and, later, to victory in WWII.<sup>228</sup> His 31 "fireside chats" were the central element of the explanation of his leadership and program, a decisive tool that helped him cut through the "unjustified terror which paralyzes." The media outlets that aired his messages in an unfiltered way to the American People provided a novel public service which went beyond the traditional role of independent journalism. In the UK, the BBC, a public broadcaster, provided a unique platform for Churchill to mobilize the morale and energies of the British People.<sup>230</sup> WWII might not have been won, and democracy might not have been saved, in the absence of a democratic mass-media public sphere and media outlets that would provide an essential public service to the cause of democracy.

FDR and Churchill managed to use their "bully pulpits" to achieve their policy aims through the use of mass media, but this does not imply that all worked well in the media landscape of democracies in the 1940's. On the contrary: as explained by Professor Stephen Bates, "newsroom bias, distrust of the media, foreign and domestic propaganda, corporate domination of political discourse, a fragmenting and polarized electorate, hate speech and demagoguery, and what we now call echo chambers, trolls, deplatforming, and post-truth politics' afflicted the U.S. of the 1940's, as it does today." To respond to this challenge, a commission

of intellectuals was formed to redefine freedom of the press.<sup>232</sup> The result of their work was reflected in the 1947 Hutchins Commission report, "A Free and Responsible Press," possibly the most influential in media history.<sup>233</sup> As explained by Archon Fung and Joshua Cohen, "American mass media grew to conform with the Hutchins Commissions' vision and recommendations."<sup>234</sup>

A highly professional media landscape emerged and increased the standards of the public service of journalism. As positive as it was its contribution to democracy, the system still imposed structural constraints on the principles of the public sphere and hence on democracy itself. Major broadcast and major print media would be one- to- many communication technologies run by a few large, for-profit companies.<sup>235</sup> The mass- media public sphere thus had a narrow aperture of information, with a few, industrially concentrated voices addressing large audiences, without much room for those in the audience to talk back or develop new themes and topics among themselves: "this was emphatically not a media system designed to foster communicative power, which is why C. Wright Mills called this the world of mass opinion, not public opinion."<sup>236</sup>

Aside from the constraint of the "narrow aperture", several scholars of the news media have pointed to other democratic challenges posed by mass-media. <sup>237</sup> Some have argued that greater exposure to political news leads to greater mistrust in government. Robinson popularized the term "videomalaise" in reference to television's ability to instigate political cynicism, arguing that the negativity and conflict found in television news, especially television coverage of elections, undermine public confidence in government. <sup>238</sup> Other authors have pointed towards the beneficial effects of media on trust and democracy. Pippa Norris, for instance, has proposed the "virtuous circle" theory, which asserts that media exposure leads to greater trust in government and civic engagement. In her view, if the disengaged are exposed to some political news, they are not likely to afford it much attention because they mistrust the media and news content, thus minimizing the media's potential influence. <sup>239</sup>

The "virtuous circle theory", however, implies that distrust in mainstream media is in itself a problem for political trust, as distrustful citizens will form their political views through the Internet and social media, which potentially channel much higher levels of disinformation. Data shows that distrust in media runs very high in liberal democracies. Gallup, for instance, confirms that Americans trust in this

key institution for democracy remains near record low.<sup>240</sup> This is a serious liability for any liberal democracy: if trust in media is low, the public sphere degrades, and this phenomenon jeopardizes the capacity of the government to deliver public policies that are synchronized with the public will, thus accelerating the domestic cycle of distrust.

The historical lessons on the mass-media public sphere appear to be mixed. Ultimately, the impact of media on democracy can be positive or negative, depending on how media operate. When media comply with the ethical norms and standards of journalism, they help preserve democracy. This is so because, first of all, they provide the public with the information that it requires to form a valid political opinion. And, secondly, a free, independent press can even be a 'watchdog of democracy' when it sheds light on any abuse or extra limitation of power, political or economic. In the U.S., for instance, this happened when The Washington Post broke open the Watergate scandal in the 1970s.<sup>241</sup>

However, when media fail to comply with the ethical norms and standards of journalism, they sow distrust, erode the public sphere and undermine democracy itself. Deregulation and increased competition turned the business model of corporate media into a trap from the 1980's. Technological developments and the expansion of cable TV in the 1990's enabled an explosion of entertainment and news supply, allowing viewers to consume their preferred product. This "broadened the aperture of information" relative to the previous mass-media model, but, in an ultra-competitive market, fighting for human attention, some private media steered away from the ethical norms and standards of independent journalism. Media had to reinvent themselves to attract viewership and revenue. This opened the doors to the 24/7 news cycle, entertainment reporting and, ultimately, the partisan sale of political narratives by some media outlets. Habermas himself argued that the evolution of mass media into large for-profit corporate conglomerates that incurred in the commodification of news contributed to the erosion (or "refeudalization") of the public sphere.

The impact of this development on trust and democracy has been adverse. For instance, a University of Maryland study on American public opinion found, amongst other issues, that sixty-nine percent of mainstream media viewers believed that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the September 11 attacks. In the composite analysis of the PIPA study, 80% of Fox News watchers had one or more

(false) perceptions about the Iraq war, in contrast to 71% for CBS and 27% who tuned to NPR/PBS.<sup>245</sup> Not all media are the same for democracy, but most suffer from the decaying trust of the public (even if, as was analyzed, trust in media is polarized).<sup>246</sup>

## Mass media and rising distrust and polarization

Mass media can have a positive or negative impact on the public sphere of democracies, depending on how they operate. Hence, the net effect of the mass-media public sphere is bivalent. However, given the evolution of the mass-media landscape since WWII, it is worth analyzing whether these changes are directly responsible of the steep rise of distrust and polarization in liberal democracies in the last decades. More concretely: are media that fail to comply with the ethical norms and standards of journalism responsible of activating and exacerbating the domestic cycles of distrust within democracies?

Certainly, free and independent journalism is positive for democracy, and deceptive and manipulative journalism is negative. But questions on root causes of complex social and political problems often lack a straightforward answer. "Bad journalism" can be detrimental to democracy, yet its effects can be minor, compared to other possible causes, such as the rise of inequalities. The rest of this section of the paper will argue that, amongst the many economic, cultural and social reasons to explain the rise of distrust and political polarization in the West, the impact of mass-media stands as particularly crucial.<sup>247</sup>

The reason is that, even if the root causes (economic, cultural, social, etc) may vary and coexist, distrust and polarization are ultimately psychological realities, which are channeled and shaped by media (and now the Internet and social media). The main mediums of transmission of ideas and information are also the main vectors of contagion of disinformation, distrust, polarization and radicalization. A media landscape that permits or incentivizes "bad journalism" and weakens comity is not a peripheral problem of democracy, but a central one.

The scourge of rising inequalities is a case in point.<sup>248</sup> Even if inequalities are measured by economic indicators, they are yet another manifestation of rising distrust and polarization, not a separate reality. Rising inequality is mostly an effect of changing economic realities and public policies, which are shaped as a response

to public opinion demands (and economic interests). Higher social distrust and affective polarization leads to waning support to redistributive policies.<sup>249</sup> Higher political distrust and political polarization leads to waning support to the role of government in the market.<sup>250</sup>

Professor Putnam seems to acknowledge this possibility. He explains that "even if economic inequality and political polarization have moved in lockstep over the last 125 years, it is not clear which force is the primary driver. Data appears to show that 'rising inequality has shown up *later* than political polarization', and the fact that 'both are highly correlated over time' is consistent with the possibility that both are the consequences of an unidentified third factor." As he says, "Change in the mass media (from "yellow journalism in 1900 to Uncle Walter Cronkite in midcentury to Fox News and Twitter feeds today) is a plausible suspect in this mystery, but research has found no clear answer to which is cause and which effect." 251

Determining with scientific certainty whether changes in mass media are a cause or an effect of polarization and distrust may indeed be complicated. There are surely feedback loops between these phenomena. It can be argued, though, that for distrust and polarization to take root, changes in mass media were required. Distrust started to rise in the U.S. in the mid/late 1960's, alongside falling comity. Political polarization followed closely. Its modern resurgence can be traced back to the 1970's. Electronic mass media, namely the radio and the TV, had already left their footprint in western industrialized societies, reshaping them. Political polarization followed closely.

This footprint had three clear manifestations. First, as Mc Luhan explained, because "we shape our tools, and then our tools shape us": the invention of TV was a key step to create a more individualistic society, as people started spending more time indoors, than interacting with their neighbors, communities, and even families.<sup>255</sup> There is a clear correlation between falling comity and rising polarization, as Putnam's "I-We-I" curve shows.<sup>256</sup> The rates of membership in unions and civic associations have been in decline in the U.S. since the mid-1960's, and so has the quality of this membership. Nowadays, for instance, the commitment of most members of CSOs is only to pay their membership fees or give donations, but not anymore to engage in a civic dialogue.<sup>257</sup> Religious attendance has followed a similar trajectory, although more sharply from the 2010's.<sup>258</sup> As a result, the rise of individualism strongly eroded or destroyed the

worker's and the citizens' public spheres.<sup>259</sup> To be clear, the rise of individualism was not only a result of a changed media landscape, but the media factor was central, not peripheral, for this to happen. Changes in media rewired human brains in a more individualistic manner. Comity, trust and cooperation retreated, the public sphere eroded and, therefore, people became more susceptible of becoming polarized.<sup>260</sup>

Second, because, other than rewiring people and societies to be more individualistic, jointly with the economic forces that owned them, the most important effect of corporate media was to create a consumerist culture. As is thoroughly explained in the 2002 BBC documentary "The Century of the Self," mass media, under the guidance of Edward Bernays, applying Freudian techniques of mass psychology, proved to be incredibly powerful instruments to shape and manipulate mass societies. The ceaseless bombardment of advertisements and political propaganda through mass media, particularly TV, targeted the human unconscious, and framed a new, consumerist society. Abundant research points in this direction. Advertisers spend millions researching how to induce consumers and their findings often lead to increasingly innovative, and sometimes intrusive, ways to market their products.

Furthermore, this process intensified as the media landscape changed. The midcentury mass-media public sphere (particularly since the 1947 Hutchins report) was very different to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century mass-media public sphere. In the U.S., the former was dominated by few broadcasting corporations, that were able to couple their shaping of a consumerist society with the provision of a high-quality public service of journalism. Individualism and consumerism rose, but the effects were somewhat offset by conscientious information to the public, which could be more easily controlled given the 'narrow aperture' to information that this media structure enabled. In most European countries, public broadcasters were the only available option: public service was their sole task. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century mass-media landscape, on the other hand, was shaped by the rise of cable TV and increased competition for human attention and advertising resources.

Ultimately, news themselves became products, and were tailored to consumers' preferences. This process ended up leading to a situation where one of the most influential news outlets in the country, Fox News, endorsed false claims that the 2020 U.S. Presidential election was stolen.<sup>265</sup> Distrust in elections was fostered by

politicians but endorsed and reinforced by a segment of a media landscape more worried about ratings and revenue than the truth. In doing so, Fox News was not behaving as a 'watchdog of democracy', but rather the opposite. The U.S. had moved, as Putnam explained, from "Uncle Walter Cronkite in mid-century to Fox News." That is: from a media landscape with a strong public service orientation, to one often devoid of it.

The role of politicians themselves should not be neglected. As argued by Professor Putnam, "the balance of opinion among experts currently is that (in polarization) the primary impetus is top-down"; and "elites send polarizing messages to the electorate in an effort to win support with partisan appeals"; and "as leaders 'signal' increasingly divergent views on specific issues, that divergence can quickly spread to their followers."<sup>267</sup> The fact that the balance of opinion among experts is that the primary impetus is 'top down' does not imply that the influence is not reciprocal. As Putnam explains, too, "probably it was a bit of both, with feedback in both directions, as voters' partisan hostility and leaders' refusal to compromise are two sides of a vicious feedback loop."<sup>268</sup>

What is essential to underline here, is that this vicious cycle of polarization was permanently mediated and enabled by a changing mass-media landscape, that broadened the aperture of information and the scope of acceptable debate, or the so-called "Overton window." According to Joseph Lehman, who coined the term, "the most common misconception is that lawmakers themselves are in the business of shifting the Overton window. That is absolutely false. Lawmakers are actually in the business of detecting where the window is, and then moving to be in accordance with it." Which means that think-tanks, academia, PR firms, but even celebrities, are some of the actors that can gradually work on public opinion, through mass-media, to amplify or change the Overton window. Politicians mostly need to work within that framework, to be electable (although they can and do push the limits too, but never alone). 271

Mass-media fostered and accelerated consumerism, and this process eroded the public sphere by turning citizens acting politically into passive, acritical, consumers. Consumerism also contributed to broaden the scope of information and accepted political debate, which is in principle positive, but it did so with the decreasing mediation of independent journalism, which can leave too much space for unethical ideas and even lies.<sup>272</sup> At the same time, it enabled the rise of a

meritocratic ethos, which further diluted social and communitarian bonds, and eroded the public sphere of democracies. As argued by Professor Michael Sandel, the dark side of meritocracy is that it divides societies between winners and losers, justifying inequalities and furthering polarization: "Among the winners, it generates hubris; among the losers, humiliation and resentment. These moral sentiments are at the heart of the populist uprising against elites."<sup>273</sup>

The third main manifestation of the late 20th century mass-media footprint on democracy was the deepening and expansion of public opinion's fragmentation into opposite and often irreconcilable worldviews. Citizens inhabiting a certain media 'bubble' or 'echo chamber' would access a completely different kind of information and public narrative than those at the other side of the political spectrum. Habermas argued that "maintaining a media structure that ensures the inclusive character of the public sphere and the deliberative formation of public opinion and political will is not a matter of political preference but a constitutional imperative." This did not happen, and the fragmentation of the public narrative resulted in the fragmentation of the understanding of core values of democracy, such as freedom and equality. This process was deepened and expanded by changes in the mass media landscape, and later reinforced and accelerated by digital technologies and social media, as will be analyzed in the next section.

As a result of this process, the meaning of democracy itself eroded in liberal democracies. Carl Jung explained that "meaninglessness inhibits fullness of life and is therefore equivalent to illness."<sup>275</sup> Fragmentation led to different constituencies searching for meaning in different narratives, at the expense of the communal narrative of democracies, generating a sort of schizophrenia of the body politic. Identity politics and what Putnam calls "the war of the we's", has come at the expense of the shared meaning of democracy, with all the hard deliberations and transactions that it requires to be kept alive.<sup>276</sup> The fragmentation of the public sphere of democracies has enabled the rise of social and political distrust and affective and political polarization. And what distrust and polarization ultimately entail is the collision of opposing worldviews and value systems, or what Lincoln would call "a house divided."

Electoral trust can hardly work if these opposing views are not woven back together into a communal narrative. Societies need 'thicker' areas of common purpose and life to remain together in a functional way. True, liberal democracies

have changed dramatically, and so have citizen's identities, as a result of economic and cultural change, migrations, the role of religion, etc.<sup>277</sup> However, it is in the nature of societies to be in flux, and this trend will most likely grow, not diminish. Higher levels of diversity and pluralism is positive for societies and more representative of the basic universal human right of freedom, yet, in the rightful and enrichening expression of individuality, democratic societies also need to find ways to constantly weave back their commonality.

Civic dialogue, enabled by a well-functioning public sphere, appears to be the only solid proposal to make this possible.<sup>278</sup> Reconciling diversity and unity is the job of the public sphere and the essence of liberal democracies. Nationalism is often the authoritarian way of weaving societies together, and it comes at the expense of diversity and individual freedoms, as it is bound to a single understanding of what belonging to a society means.<sup>279</sup> Nationalism is the core proposal of Russia and China to their populations, and it comes at the expense of their inner ethnic and ideological diversity. In autocracies, common narratives are imposed, and their questioning are a threat to their stability.<sup>280</sup>

But illiberal nationalism is not exclusive to authoritarian regimes, it has been rising in polarized democracies, bolstered by distrust in politics and far-right parties.<sup>281</sup> These parties do not support the liberal world order, and have or can forge close relations with autocracies, particularly Russia. Moscow's aim is to have illiberal far-right parties in the West supporting its objective of bringing down the rules-based order. This is the scenario of the "two Wests" that Putin talked about and has been actively sponsoring. Civic deliberation, or patriotic constitutionalism, is the most effective alternative to illiberal nationalism and the method for democracies to come together.<sup>282</sup> It is enshrined in different democratic Constitutions in different ways. In the U.S., it is codified in its motto, "e pluribus unum." To be able to make "out of many, one" is the role of a well-functioning public sphere. It implies that common narratives need to be woven by an open and inclusive free and equal deliberation amongst citizens.

The advent of an individualistic, consumerist, meritocratic culture, was made possible by mass media and the shifting of the public sphere into a mass-media public sphere.<sup>283</sup> This trend was later accelerated into social fragmentation by the mass-media transition to a model often void of a public service dimension. As argued by Karl Popper, "we are social creatures to the inmost center of our

being. The notion that one can begin anything at all from scratch, free from the past, or unindebted to others, could not conceivably be more wrong."<sup>284</sup> The mediasponsored rise of an individualistic, selfish ethos may have benefitted capitalism in the short term, but it has undermined democracy in the longer one. Free, independent journalism had been considered a central pillar of liberal democracy since its inception, and even had constitutional protections in most democracies. Yet, the neoliberal wave of the 1980's and 1990's eroded the model of independent journalism as a public service, transforming it into a consumption good. As argued by Michael Sandel, the marketisation of everything has undermined democracy.<sup>285</sup>

Individualism and consumerism gradually crowded out comity, civism and trust. In the void left by this encroachment of democratic values by market forces into the public sphere, distrust, polarization and fragmentation naturally grew. The ultimate reason for this downfall is that humans being social animals, societies are ill-equipped to deal with extreme forms of individualism. The breakup of communitarian bonds generates distrust and fear. When comity, civism and trust are strong, the natural drive of people towards disagreement and conflict (consequence of cognitive biases, neural polarization, in-group/out-group dynamics, etc), can be balanced. <sup>286</sup> When comity, civism and trust are weakened, this natural drive rearises, and can be manipulated, politically or economically. Changes in the media landscape brought about the more individualistic, consumerist, and meritocratic society desired by economic forces, but an unintended effect was that the public sphere of democracies fragmented. As a result, polarization, distrust and fear rose and, with them, illiberalism and the threat of democratic backsliding into authoritarianism.

The 2019 report "Crisis in Democracy: Renewing Trust in America", elaborated by the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy, acknowledges the impact of the media landscape on rising distrust and polarization. It states that "there is an urgency today in the United States. Political polarization has reached crisis proportions. Americans cannot assume that their fellow citizens are operating under the same set of facts. Many of us live inside echo chambers where only our own political sentiments can be heard, and distrust those who do not agree with our particular viewpoint." With an analysis that parallels the 1947 report "A Free and Responsible Press", the Knight report echoes many of the concerns that inspired the Hutchins Commission's deliberations on the role of the press after WWII, but with recommendations that apply to journalism, technology, and citizenship in the digital age. 288

## The digital public sphere and the digital disruption

In the U.S., the domestic cycle of distrust was re-activated in the mid/late 1960's, long before the advent of the Internet or social media. <sup>289</sup> Certainly, social media platforms could not be the origin of these phenomena. They could, though, reinforce them and further accelerate them, making them more salient and problematic for democracy, and so they did. The opposite could have happened.

This section of the paper will argue that the Internet, particularly social media, have further eroded the public sphere of democracies, turning a crisis which could have been managed by the institutions of representative democracy, into an almost intractable one, which will require deep reforms and innovations. Given the current situation of distrust and polarization within their societies, if liberal democracies overcome their crises, it will be as a result of a "radical relandscaping" of their perspectives, tools and procedures.<sup>290</sup> As argued by Professor Coleman, "intractable forms of harmful polarization require that their edifice be restructured."<sup>291</sup>

The reason for this assessment is that digital technologies have, at the same time, the potential to fully dismantle democracy, if wrongly used, but also the capacity to serve as an indispensable instrument for democratic recovery. The digital threat has become more apparent in 2023, with the irruption of generative AI, and so has the digital opportunity. Democracy, and the liberal world order, are at a crossroads. And the decisions taken to regulate and control AI and digital media may matter more to the future of democracy than the confrontation with Russia and China. Furthermore, a revitalized democratic home front will reduce the incentives for authoritarian interference and aggression.

Why do digital technologies matter so much? The global economy and most, if not all, measures of power, have nowadays a digital dimension. The U.S. CHIPS and Science Act and Washington's efforts to stay ahead of China on AI bear witness of this importance.<sup>293</sup> But the weight of digital technologies goes beyond the economy and material measures of power: democratic resilience and societal cohesion also contain a strategic digital dimension. The reason is that the Internet, and particularly social media, brought about a revolution to a decaying public sphere.

Free, independent journalism had provided citizens with reliable information to

deliberate and form a public opinion, whereas corporate mass electronic media, particularly from the 1990's, had too often degraded and fragmented the public sphere by turning citizens into passive consumers of partisan news.<sup>294</sup> Social media were revolutionary insofar they allowed citizens, for the first time in history, to engage and deliberate in large numbers through digital means. The reach of social media went far beyond the 18<sup>th</sup> century Parisian cafes, Viennese salons and New England-style colonial-era town hall meetings that inspired Habermas to conceptualize the birth of the "bourgeois public sphere." Facebook, for instance, currently has about 3 billion users worldwide, double the population of China.<sup>296</sup>

The Internet and social media created a new "digital public sphere." It now overlaps and is as influential or more than the 'mass media public sphere'. This paper follows the notion of digital public sphere as described by Professor Archon Fung, Director of the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, and Joshua Cohen, senior Director at Apple Inc.: "By 'the digital public sphere,' we mean a public sphere in which discussion about matters of potentially shared concern is shaped in part by communication on online platforms (intermediaries that store users' information and enable its public dissemination). Thus, the digital public sphere is neither everything that happens online or on online platforms (much of which is not discussion of matters of shared concern), nor is it only online. It is a public sphere in which communication on platforms plays an important role in shaping public discussion."<sup>297</sup>

Whether the digital public sphere approaches the ideal criteria of the old, idealized, public sphere, which relies on an open, free, inclusive, egalitarian, rational debate on public matters, is actually debated. Cyber pessimists point to the existing flaws of interactions within the digital realm and in social media (degree of participation, lack of diversity due to fragmentation into like-minded groups, influence of Big Tech and private interests, absence of face-to-face interactions, etc). <sup>298</sup> Cyber-optimists, on the other hand, point to the opportunities (open, easy and fast access, empowerment of people given the absence of 'gatekeepers', production of new decentralized ways of communication and collaboration, such as Wikis, etc). <sup>299</sup>

Both positions are probably correct, as they are mostly compatible. As happens with mass-media, digital media can enable or erode the public sphere, depending on how they work. The rest of this section will mostly focus on the flaws of

present-day mainstream digital media, particularly social media. The reason is that, in their current manifestation, they are mostly detrimental to democracy, as they fail to fulfil the criteria of a well-functioning public sphere and are thus accelerating the domestic cycles of distrust within democracies. The next section of the paper will forward a policy proposal to revitalize the digital public sphere of democracies, based on the opportunities offered by digital technologies. As argued by Archon Fung and Joshua Cohen, "online information and communication are so much less than they could be. They fall far short of their democratic potential for fostering diverse and interconnected engagements." 300

The first major problem of mainstream social media goes beyond social media. Facebook, Twitter (rebranded "X"), YouTube, TikTok, and now Threads, emerged in individualistic, consumerist, fragmented societies, and were built on the same structure of incentives than corporate private media: they needed to attract their users' attention to profit from advertising. These companies emerged in a particular neoliberal socio-economic and cultural context of intense market competition and search for quick profits. From a business perspective, they did what they were supposed to do according to the surrounding economic culture: achieve success. "Move fast and break things", became Facebook's motto. It now sounds unappealing, but it represented the business zeitgeist of the time. 301

Social media, as a result of their design and nature, radically broadened the aperture of information, compared to any mass-media model. As explained by Archon Fung and Joshua Cohen, "the distribution mechanism is different, the range of voices is greater." Also, "social conditions of polarization and fragmentation combine with low barriers to content creation and high user choice to create an informational environment that is much more diverse but in which users find it easier to cluster into— or find themselves algorithmically shepherded into—homogeneous information spaces that share less epistemic common ground across different spaces than in the mass- media public sphere." Ultimately, with all of its positive effects, the wider aperture of information also expands opportunities for expression and communication that violate norms of truth seeking, a commongood orientation, and civility.

Furthermore, social media were allowed to take the business model of attentionseeking many steps further than mass-media outlets, as they could also harvest the private data of their users for profit, in a way that traditional media could not. Besides, unlike media outlets, in the U.S., social media were provided immunity from liability with respect to third-party content generated by its users by Section 230 of the U.S. Telecommunications Act. Fox News, for instance, has faced consequences for the Dominion Voting System lawsuit, in a way that Big Tech cannot face. Unlike broadcasters, digital media platforms typically do not create content; instead, their power lies in providing and governing a digital infrastructure. Although that infrastructure could serve as a digital public sphere, it is the platforms that exert much control over the dynamics of information flow. Due to the economic and regulatory surrounding environment, and the nature of their activity, social media companies have found little to no incentives to develop their business model with a public service approach. As a result, they have become one of the biggest obstacles to a cohesive public sphere that functions for democracy.

Harvard's Democracy and Internet Government Initiative, for instance, has recently published its final report "towards digital platforms and public purpose". In its executive summary, the report states: "While platforms have brought numerous benefits, there is now an overwhelming recognition of their potential negative effects on individuals, society, and democracy. From the spread of misinformation and privacy concerns to cyberbullying and algorithmic biases, these harms demand a comprehensive and nuanced understanding, as well as mitigation strategies." <sup>307</sup> It also states that "sociologists, computer scientists, political scientists, economists, lawyers, and anthropologists alike—have more or less converged to say one thing: social media's negative externalities and companies' exploitive behavior is a known quantity issue and we need to act." <sup>308</sup>

Furthermore, a 2023 systematic review of worldwide causal and correlational evidence on digital media and democracy has found out that "the large majority of reported associations between digital media use and trust appear to be detrimental for democracy", that "digital media use is associated with eroding the 'glue that keeps democracies together': trust in political institutions," and that "digital media use is associated with increases in hate, populism and polarization."<sup>309</sup> This review concludes that "Our results provide grounds for concern. Alongside the positive effects of digital media for democracy, there is clear evidence of serious threats to democracy. Considering the importance of these corrosive and potentially difficult-to-reverse effects for democracy, a better understanding of the diverging effects of digital media in different political contexts (for example, authoritarian vs democratic) is

*urgently needed.*"<sup>310</sup> An ongoing collaborative review on social media and political dysfunction, and further research, will shed further light on the matter.<sup>311</sup>

It is clear that large social media platforms have not strengthened comity and civism, but distrust and polarization. They are too often vectors of contagion of disinformation, and sometimes their incubators too, as their algorithms are designed to keep a high degree of engagement, which is often obtained through falsehoods and outrage. 312 Their role in fostering conspiracy theories, illiberal and autocratic narratives has been a central feature of the decay of public trust in democratic institutions. <sup>313</sup> Furthermore, they have deepened and expanded fragmentation. As argued by Habermas, the "more or less exclusive use of social media" blurs "the distinction between public and private, and thus the inclusive meaning of the public sphere." This implies that "citizens increasingly refuse -or fail to recognize the need- to comply with the standards of public autonomy even when issues of the common good are at stake. The result is the emergence of semi-publics, whose members no longer regard the general public as the place for the discursive clarification of validity of claims, but see it as a realm of hypocrisy whose protagonists ignore 'the truth' (i.e. what appears as such from within self-referential spaces). What was once an inclusive space, integrating all citizens, is thus degraded, in the perception of some members of society, to just another sectarian semi-public."315

As has been analyzed, there are several reasons to explain the rise of distrust and political polarization, but the centrality of mass-media and now of social media as vectors of contagion and incubators of distrust and fear cannot be diminished. Rather than contributing to restore comity and trust in the digital realm, major social media platforms have often acted as trust eroding and polarizing machines. The expansion of QAnon and the MAGA movement, and the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021, cannot be understood without analyzing the role played by social media platforms, and the same applies to the attacks against Brazil's institutions earlier this year. The Furthermore, social media platforms have also been weaponized by foreign autocratic governments to consolidate their rule, manipulate and expand political divisions and interfere in electoral processes in liberal democracies.

The quickly accelerating development of AI technologies make this issue even more pressing, as its impact on democratic governance can be devastating. ChatGPT 2023 is only a small step towards a world where every aspect of life will be influenced and

possibly compromised by AI. The digital public sphere of democracies, democratic institutions and the democratic process that binds them together can be hacked today by autocratic actors, foreign or national, using existing digital platforms and increasingly sophisticated AI tools.

On March 22, 2023, prominent tech and social leaders, experts on the field of AI, and citizens, signed an Open Letter titled "Pause Giant AI experiments" which called on all AI labs to immediately pause for at least six months the training of AI systems more powerful than GPT-4.<sup>317</sup> The following is an excerpt from the letter: "Contemporary AI systems are now becoming human-competitive at general tasks, and we must ask ourselves: Should we let machines flood our information channels with propaganda and untruth? Should we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones? Should we develop nonhuman minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart, obsolete and replace us? Should we risk loss of control of our civilization? Such decisions must not be delegated to unelected tech leaders. Powerful AI systems should be developed only once we are confident that their effects will be positive and their risks will be manageable."

With the exception of Elon Musk and Steve Wozniak, however, most Big Tech leaders were reluctant to sign a letter concretely requesting a pause on giant AI experiments. Bill Gates released an article presenting a completely different approach to the question of AI, mostly highlighting the opportunities for humanity. Some weeks later, a shorter statement, signed this time by most tech leaders or representatives from Big Tech (including those that did not sign the March Open Letter, like Bill Gates or Sam Altman), briefly said "mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war." The pronouncements of the most prominent experts and leaders on AI on the risks of this technology not only to democracy, but to the survival of the human species, sent shockwaves through the world.

There can be little doubt on the threat that AI represents to democracy worldwide, given the warnings casted even by Big Tech itself. Free, independent journalism was and still is a necessary condition of a functioning public sphere, yet the developments of mass media, particularly since the development of cable TV, undermined the public sphere of democracies. The Internet and social media brought about the promise of a renewed public sphere, yet the business model and structure of incentives of large social media platforms accelerated distrust and

polarization, further undermining democracies' public spheres. Large language models (LLMs), the basis of generative AI, could fragment and damage the public sphere way beyond what democracies have experienced so far.

As argued by historian and philosopher Yuval Noah Harari, AI has hacked the operating system of human civilization. This is because, as he explains: "humans often don't have direct access to reality. We are cocooned by culture, experiencing reality through a cultural prism. Our political views are shaped by the reports of journalists and the anecdotes of friends. Our sexual preferences are tweaked by art and religion. That cultural cocoon has hitherto been woven by other humans. What will it be like to experience reality through a prism produced by nonhuman intelligence?" 121

If left unregulated, or if inadequately regulated, AI would turn the concept and ideal of the public sphere into an illusion, void of any substantive meaning. How can an open, inclusive, rational and constructive dialogue between free and equal citizens on matters of common interest take place, when human agency is outsourced to LLMs? How can the commitments to truth, appropriateness and sincerity be fulfilled in a civic dialogue, when AI bots, deepfakes, and 'hallucinations' swarm the communication playing field? Habermas denounced that consumerism and mass media had turned active citizens acting politically into passive, unthinking, consumers, but still believed that deliberative democracy could help achieve the Enlightenment notion of human emancipation. Would this still be possible, in a world where 'AI personal assistants', designed in giant corporate AI labs, guide human actions, communications and thinking processes? Unregulated digital technologies are the "hidden core" of the global maelstrom of distrust. Developments on AI have now made this 'core' more visible.

## International competition and cooperation on digital technologies

Experts, philosophers, social scientists and even Big Tech have sounded the alarms. The calls for industry moderation are coupled with an urge to quickly regulate AI, but to do it properly.<sup>323</sup> For some, regulating AI properly means intensively, providing an adequate protection of citizens' rights, with the aim of preserving social and political trust and the common good. For others, regulating AI properly means lightly, avoiding impediments to the development of the new

technology, which provides massive opportunities and resources of power. The former view is mostly enshrined in the approach of the EU, the latter in that of the U.S.

There is a general consensus on the fact that AI represents a systemic risk to humanity, which means that global cooperation is required. Ian Bremmer, for instance, has argued that "we'll need national action, global cooperation, and some commonsense cooperation from the US and Chinese governments, in particular." Furthermore, he considers that "the United Nations has a role to play as the only institution with the convening power to develop a global consensus. A UN-led approach to AI will never be the most efficient response, but by building consensus on the nature of the problem and pooling international resources, it will help." He has also suggested that "there could also be an artificial intelligence agency modeled on the International Atomic Energy Agency to help police AI proliferation." Poliferation."

Given the distrust and confrontation between Washington and Beijing, even if necessary, this effort may be difficult to achieve. Ian Bremmer himself acknowledges that it is far-fetched: "The timing is terrible because these breakthroughs arrive at a time of intense competition between two powerful countries that really don't trust one another."<sup>327</sup> Certainly, the ongoing geopolitical cycle of distrust may not make this approach possible for the time being, as necessary as it may be. Furthermore, given the connection of this cycle with the domestic cycles of distrust, any effort to achieve such a rapprochement may ultimately backfire.

The U.S. faces a challenging presidential election in 2024, which may turn efforts to regulate AI domestically, or to cooperate with China, electorally problematic. Professor Steve Pearlstein's account on how Congress has failed to rein in Big Tech may prove an indicator of the regulatory perspectives in Washington, which can be extended to cooperation with China on AI.<sup>328</sup> Xi Jinping may also be unwilling to cooperate with the U.S. on AI, in the same way that it has rejected cooperation on transparency and risk reduction.<sup>329</sup> Beijing does not want to tie its hands on strategic issues, as it does not want its rise to be impeded or contained by Washington. True, the U.S. is ahead on AI. But China appears to prioritize the internal stability of its regime over great power competition with the U.S. on AI: LLMs can be unpredictable, and the future of the CCP matters most.<sup>330</sup>

If cooperation between the U.S. and China on AI is unlikely, and as a result necessary efforts at the UN will probably either stall or be unfruitful, the potential of another path can be further examined: reinforced cooperation between democracies, particularly between the U.S. and the EU. But even this path of cooperation may prove to be challenging. There are wide differences on Washington's and Brussels's approaches.

Within advanced democracies, the EU has taken a lead on digital and AI regulation. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the Digital Markets Act (DMA), establish an advanced framework of governance of big digital platforms ('gatekeepers'), that sets boundaries to their operations and recognizes the digital rights of users. The GDPR enshrined privacy rights on the Internet, the DMA aimed to ensure fair and open digital markets and the DSA is the most ambitious effort in regulating social media and constitutes a challenge for Silicon Valley.<sup>331</sup> Soon, the AI Act will represent the main global effort to regulate AI. Due to the size of its internal market and the power of its regulatory authorities, there has been an extensive "Brussels effect" of EU digital regulations: instead of making the costly decision of creating separate business models, firms try to conform to EU's regulations worldwide.

The U.S., though, is following a much laxer approach than the EU.<sup>332</sup> Political polarization and gridlock, the large scope of the First Amendment, and the lobbying power of Big Tech, is so far preventing the U.S. from effectively regulating digital technologies, particularly social media.<sup>333</sup> However, the "Protecting Kids on Social Media Act," introduced in April by a bipartisan group of senators, could be a step in the right direction.<sup>334</sup> Furthermore, new, innovative proposals, are adding energy to the debate. For instance, after analyzing more than 200 proposals related to U.S.-based platform governance across industry, government and civil society, Harvard's Democracy and Internet Government Initiative has proposed a risk framework, including risks generated or exacerbated by the use of digital platforms to help guide better solutions for digital platform governance.<sup>335</sup>

The aim of Harvard's proposal, which is "to pull the conversation away from the mainstream political dialogue and towards something that can be implemented in a bi-partisan manner—and through the collaboration of business, government, and civil society," could be fruitful, as awareness of the problem posed by social media has been steadily growing in the country. Possible AI regulations appear to be facing

better perspectives, as the industry is asking to be regulated.<sup>336</sup> Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer is laying the groundwork for legislation to regulate AI. But, for the moment, President Biden's AI Bill of Rights is of non-binding nature, and so are the guardrails recently agreed by AI companies.<sup>337</sup> Ultimately, geopolitical considerations may delay or water-down U.S. efforts to further regulate AI.<sup>338</sup>

For the time being, the EU and the U.S. are still in very different places in terms of digital regulation. If this situation persists, the transatlantic rift on digital and AI regulations could eventually affect the relationship between the U.S. and the EU. The divergences at both sides of the Atlantic on the balance between democracy and the market could have geopolitical effects at a time when the transatlantic unity is most required.<sup>339</sup> It is unlikely that tech companies will pause giant AI experiments, or that the U.S. government will establish a moratorium, as leading tech experts have suggested.<sup>340</sup> Whether Washington will succeed in aptly and promptly regulating AI and social media is to be seen.

Big Tech is helping the U.S. take the lead on AI. The paradox is that this and other digital technologies, without due democratic control, will continue eroding democracy and enhancing autocracy, generating a "boomerang effect" against the West. In the meantime, autocracies will continue using digital technologies and AI to enhance their surveillance and repressive capacities.

The lack of regulation of social media in the U.S. generated a worldwide challenge to democracy, which EU regulations alone will hardly be able to offset. Applying an uncoordinated approach to AI could be detrimental to democracy globally.

The U.S. and the EU need to fully repair their digital rift to better protect democracy at home and the liberal world order. Both sides have recently finalized a new deal on data transfers, the EU-U.S. Data Privacy Framework. It is a step in the good direction, but it is likely that it will be challenged again in court and, in such case, could come to the European Court of Justice in early 2024.<sup>341</sup> It is also possibly not enough to repair the digital rift, as both sides still maintain divergent approaches to digital regulation. A concrete policy proposal on a possible contribution to foster a digital rapprochement between both sides is advanced in the next section of the paper.

# Reviving The Lighthouse of Democracy: A Policy Proposal to Aid Democracies Rebuild Their Public Spheres and Protect The Liberal World Order

"There are three things necessary for government: weapons, food and trust. If a ruler cannot hold on to all three, he should give up weapons first and food next. Trust should be guarded to the end: without trust we cannot stand".

- Confucius

This proposal's theory of change is based on the consideration that substantial democratic reforms in polarized societies require a prior exercise of rehabilitation of the functionality of the digital public sphere, which cannot be achieved through the existing for-profit social media ecosystem, given its externalities. In other words, to regenerate democracy's central nervous system, and re-activate trust in democracy, the civic mobilization of citizen's efforts towards a common purpose will be required.

Reliable information and civic dialogue are the core elements of the public sphere, democratic stability, and the preservation of the rules-based international order. Advanced democracies must ensure that the full potential of the Internet, social media, and AI is applied to regenerate democratic trust, amongst their own citizens, and worldwide. This will be the main antidote against the rise of authoritarianism, domestically and globally.

This policy proposal will forward the argument that, in the 2020s, the protection of democracy at both the domestic and international level has essential civic and digital dimensions. This is the case because democracy is, in essence, a civic dialogue. And today, to a large extent, it takes place on the Internet and through digital technologies. A cohesive public sphere works as an incubator of social and political trust, where democratic culture and governance can flourish. The public sphere of democracies has fragmented and polarized in the last decades and years, bringing as a result a decline of trust on democratic politics. Illiberalism and authoritarianism are filling the void left by the erosion of civic dialogue and the public sphere.

As Habermas argued: "the modern state presupposes as the principle of its own truth the sovereignty of the people, and this in turn is supposed to be public opinion. Without this attribution, without the substitution of public opinion as the origin of all authority for decisions binding the whole, modern democracy lacks the substance of its own truth." Many policy measures will be necessary to protect and repair liberal democracy, including economic, social, political and environmental. Addressing inequalities will be absolutely essential.

This paper focuses specifically on the reparation of the digital public sphere, which is a necessary condition to revive democracy itself.<sup>343</sup> It is a condition to restore trust and reduce polarization. It is also one of many measures required to reduce inequalities, as equal and free participation is a requirement of a well-functioning public sphere.<sup>344</sup> Political equality is the essence of democracy. An effective democratic governance, based on a vibrant public sphere, is required to face domestic and international challenges, from the rise of authoritarianism to climate change and inequalities. The environment, the economy, and the world order cannot be repaired if a civic dialogue based on reliable information is not restored first within democracies.

The free press is sometimes named the lighthouse of democracy. In this paper, the concept of lighthouse is expanded, to include the entire public sphere. The role of independent journalism is rendered ineffective if its information does not reach the entire political audience, or if it is silenced by the noise of disinformation, propaganda and deep fakes. A mass-scale civic dialogue is unfeasible in the absence of reliable information. Truthful information is toxic for autocracies, but indispensable for democracies. Massive disinformation is a necessary condition of

autocracy, but it's lethal for democracy. In the 2020's, the lighthouse of democracy is not just the free press or the mass media public sphere. It is trustworthy information reaching all society and enabling civic dialogue. From a domestic perspective, the lighthouse of democracy is the entire public sphere: old and new, mass media and digital. From a global perspective, the lighthouse of the liberal world order is democracy itself.

Some authors have underlined the utopian elements of Habermas's idealized public sphere, as free and unfettered communication remains an unfulfilled illusion, in the positive and rational sense.<sup>345</sup> Habermas himself acknowledged that "the 'good' is neither a convention nor an essence, but rather the result of fantasy." But he also stated that "it must be fantasized so exactly that it corresponds to and articulates a fundamental interest."<sup>346</sup> The public sphere, democracy, and a peaceful, cooperative world order are human psychological constructs, which require points of reference. In the absence of idealized points of reference, democratic navigation is unfeasible.

As argued by psychiatrist neurologist and philosopher Viktor Frankl, who was also a Holocaust survivor, "if we take man as he really is, we make him worse. But if we overestimate him...if we seem to be idealists and are overrating man, expecting him to be higher than he can, you know what happens? We promote him to what he really can be. So we have to be idealists in a way, because then we wind up as the true realists."<sup>347</sup> Or, as expressed more pragmatically by Mariana Mazzucato, Marietje Schaake, Seb Krier, and Josh Entsminger: "having a point on the horizon matters;" "strategies that prioritize innovation and investment have traditionally focused on improving the rate of technological development, but the direction of that development has received less attention."<sup>348</sup> In the age of rampant distrust, polarization, illiberalism and rising authoritarianism, reviving democracy and the liberal world order will require setting ambitious points of reference, particularly for new technological developments, such as AI.

As mentioned in the introduction, the aim of this policy proposal is to provide an idealized framework for a well-functioning digital public sphere which, like a lighthouse, could better work for democracy and the liberal world order. Its purpose is to signal a direction of navigation, away from the maelstrom of distrust and towards democratic recovery, but not an end-destination. Its recommendations are based on an ambitious architecture of digital platforms that,

combining technology and human cooperation, could help restore civic dialogue and political and social trust. Hence, this proposal should be seen as an "idealized sketch," or "draft," that could be useful for the vibrant ongoing discussion on how to make digital technologies reinforce democracy, rather than undermine it. It has brought many obstacles and challenges into consideration, and many remain unsolved. None, however, should be considered unsolvable. As argued by Spanish poet Antonio Machado: "caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar." Its central argument is based on this understanding: truthful information and civic dialogue are essential public goods for democracy, everywhere, and their provision requires strong and reliable public services. The journey of developing a strong public service for the digital public sphere is worth the effort.

Autocracies are not the only or single challenge for democratic rule worldwide. Autocracy also emerges from within democracies, when democratic institutions fail to provide the services and, above all, the trust, that democratic governance requires. The fast development of AI can contribute to further energize the global maelstrom of distrust, if it further erodes and fragments the public spheres of democracies. However, technology also represents an opportunity. Democracies can seize it, by applying the best techniques of human control, democratic governance and civic deliberation to AI, and then by using democratically controlled AI as a lever to scale-up a better, more open and more inclusive democratic governance.

Currently, the digital public sphere is not working for democracy as it could and should. But technologies are not the problem, their use and governance are. Wellgoverned mass-media are necessary for large democracies. Well-governed digital technologies, including AI, can dramatically improve the functioning of present-day democracy. Reviving the digital public sphere is possible: there are countless positive experiences that prove it. What is mostly required is to find ways to scale them up, domestically and globally. The following is a policy proposal to move towards that aim. It will be developed in three main sections:

- 1. Policy background
- 2. Policy building block: Public options LLMs and AI governance
- 3. Policy proposal. Adapting the Lighthouse of Democracy to the Internet and AI

#### **Policy background**

In the 1990s, the Internet brought about hopes of democratic revival through increased citizenship participation in the newly formed digital public sphere. These hopes are yet to materialize. As of 2023, trust in democracy keeps waning, while polarization remains at historic highs. The Internet and social media have made it clear that it is possible to organize massive citizens' conversations, and make democratic institutions be aware of them. But improvements in e-governance or the digital strategies traditional media or CSOs have not matched the crisis of trust and polarization that is taking place within democracies.

The Internet is too vast, and only mega-hubs, like the biggest platforms owned by Big Tech, attract enough attention and can exert a systemic influence on the public sphere of large societies. Social media are not effectively working to generate trust in democracy, empower citizenship or manage a constructive dialogue. The opposite is happening. Democracies are being eroded by distrust, polarization and fragmentation, and the liberal world order is threatened by the rising assertiveness and aggressiveness of authoritarian regimes.

The situation, however, can be reverted. The Internet and social media, including AI, can become effective tools to revert the current hyper-individualistic trend, regenerate civic communities, and pump trust back into the body politic of democracy, in a way that will help protect the liberal world order. They can facilitate the task of "weaving back" common societal narratives and the democratic consensus. The first logical step to try to achieve this objective would be to develop adequate regulatory frameworks and to harmonize them across advanced democracies.

The EU, as was analyzed, has already responded to the challenge with the adoption of the GDPR, the DSA, the DMA and, soon, the AI Act.<sup>351</sup> Brussels has de facto become the world's most relevant digital regulator. Washington, though, is not yet following suit in terms of regulation, due to legislative gridlock, Big Tech lobbying and different geopolitical calculations: the U.S. has the most powerful and advanced tech companies in the world, leads on AI, and is locked into a great geopolitical rivalry with China.<sup>352</sup>

The transatlantic digital regulatory rift is a roadblock on the way to revert the adverse impact of social media and AI on democracy worldwide. The extension of EU regulations to the U.S. may be a temporary solution, but it cannot be a permanent fix, and at some point, it can generate a serious backlash in the relationship. Jay Clayton, former chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, and Gary D. Cohn, former chairman of the National Economic Council during the Trump Administration, have argued that regulatory outsourcing by the U.S. to the EU is "a blow to American sovereignty." This could be an anticipation of more difficult times for the transatlantic relationship under a possible future Republican Administration, which could further erode the digital regulatory rift.

On the EU side, there is the perception that some Big Tech companies are not effectively complying with its regulations. The 1.2 billion euro fine on Meta for violating the GDPR is one of the most recent examples.<sup>354</sup> As was mentioned, both sides have succeeded in finalizing a new deal on data transfers, the EU-U.S. Data Privacy Framework. It is certainly a step in the good direction, but it is likely that it will be challenged again in court and, in such case, could come to the European Court of Justice in early 2024.<sup>355</sup> Previous deals (such as Privacy Shield and Safe Harbor) were struck down by the European Court of Justice, over fears of U.S. intelligence services' surveillance practices.<sup>356</sup>

The EU-U.S. Data Privacy Framework is a step in the right direction, but possibly not enough to repair the digital rift, as both sides still maintain divergent approaches to digital regulation. Many more measures will be needed, as the digital rift is not limited to just the privacy aspects of digital platforms but reflects two different political realities: one based on ambitious regulations, and another one on a "laissez-faire" approach. Sarah Eaton, Daniel Fuchs and Paul Triolo share concerns on the digital "rough sailing" that the EU-U.S. are headed to. 357 Eileen Donahoe, in a paper co-authored with Alina Polyakova, President and CEO of the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), has warned of the risks of this rift in face of China's rising digital authoritarian model, and suggested that the U.S. and the EU "must overcome their own tech policy divisions and embrace responsibility to develop a democratic digital strategy that attracts global support. The agenda must simultaneously drive innovation and solidify a normative framework for governance of data and technology that protects fundamental rights." 358

This is correct, yet a central element of a democratic digital strategy that attracts global support may require the development of projects that go beyond a digital transatlantic regulatory rapprochement. The reason is that this rapprochement is extremely challenging, as it is difficult to foresee deep changes at either side of the Atlantic. The EU can be expected to continue regulating the digital realm, including AI, as it is its duty. The U.S., unless a significant political realignment takes place, can be expected to maintain its loose regulatory approach towards Big Tech. Hence, the U.S. will increase its lead on digital and AI with, possibly, larger social, political and cultural costs. The EU will consolidate and increase its lead on digital and AI regulation, but it may lag behind on possible paths of innovation and the power dividends of these new technologies.

A consolidation of this transatlantic bifurcation would be unfortunate. It would not be aligned with the geopolitical challenge of the new Cold War nor the ideological confrontation between democracy and autocracy. Furthermore, it would place the U.S. and the EU at odds on a crucial element of power competition and democratic stability at a critical moment. It would not serve the domestic interests of the U.S., as its social cohesion and digital public sphere would suffer most, causing an increase in political polarization, radicalization and distrust. It would not serve the interests of the EU, either, because it would lag further behind on innovation linked to power capacities, which would also make it more difficult to keep pace with adequate regulations.<sup>360</sup>

If a transatlantic regulatory rapprochement is unlikely, and a digital rift is counter-productive, other measures must also be considered. Industrial and civic cooperation to enhance a common approach to the protection of democracy at home and worldwide can be a fruitful option. States have a longstanding tradition of cooperation on science, technology, industry and education. The International Space Station (ISS), the European Council for Nuclear Research (CERN), or the Erasmus program are well-known examples. Democracies, led by the EU and the U.S., can develop a framework of technological, industrial and civic cooperation on digital technologies to support their digital public spheres, democratic resilience and the liberal world order.

## Policy basis: Public options Large Language Models: LLM, and Al governance

Bruce Schneier, Henry Farrell, and Nathan E. Sanders have suggested the development of public options LLM (Large Language Models, such as GPT4) to aid democracy. The authors argue that "A.I. could advance the public good, not private profit, and bolster democracy instead of undermining it. That would require an A.I. not under the control of a large tech monopoly, but rather developed by government and available to all citizens." The current model of digital public sphere, structured around the monopolistic dominance of Big Tech, is unsatisfactory, as it does not satisfy the criteria of a well-functioning public sphere. As was analyzed already, the problem is not in the technology, but in the use and governance of that technology.

The aforementioned authors consider that "public LLMs could test new applications that could support democracy, rather than undermining it. (...). They could help citizens formulate their perspectives and policy positions, making political arguments more cogent and informed, whether in social media, letters to the editor, or comments to rule-making agencies (...). <sup>362</sup> The next generation of A.I. experimentation should happen in the laboratories of democracy: states and municipalities. Online town halls to discuss participatory budgeting could be an easy first step."

The authors' view on how public LLMs could support democracy, rather than undermine it, is the first building block of this policy proposal, which focuses on human, social and institutional arrangements that could contribute to use AI and digital technologies for the common good. The proposal is also inspired by Archon Fung and Joshua Cohen's assessment of the digital public sphere, contained in their 2021 paper on "Digital Technology and Democratic Theory" and the 2019 Knight report "Crisis in Democracy: Renewing Trust in America." 363

UNESCO's recommendation on the Ethics of AI, adopted by 193 Member States in November of 2021, which calls for a human-centered AI, and the development of international and national policies and regulatory frameworks to ensure that these emerging technologies benefit humanity as a whole, has also been considered. The proposal is also inspired by the Open Letter "Pause Giant AI experiments" of March 22, 2023, signed by prominent tech and social leaders, experts on the field of AI, and citizens, which called on all AI labs to immediately pause for at least six

months the training of AI systems more powerful than GPT-4.<sup>365</sup> The following is an excerpt from the letter: Contemporary AI systems are now becoming human-competitive at general tasks, and we must ask ourselves: Should we let machines flood our information channels with propaganda and untruth? Should we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones? Should we develop nonhuman minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart, obsolete and replace us? Should we risk loss of control of our civilization? Such decisions must not be delegated to unelected tech leaders. Powerful AI systems should be developed only once we are confident that their effects will be positive and their risks will be manageable."

If AI labs effectively paused giant AI experiments, or if governments established a moratorium, would there be any governance solutions that could be established, beyond the urgently needed regulations? How could such solutions balance the internal needs of democracies and the demands of geopolitics, including the generation of a transatlantic digital rapprochement? Even in the absence of a moratorium: can a human-led AI contribute to repair the digital public sphere and regenerate trust on democracy in the context of the current maelstrom of distrust?

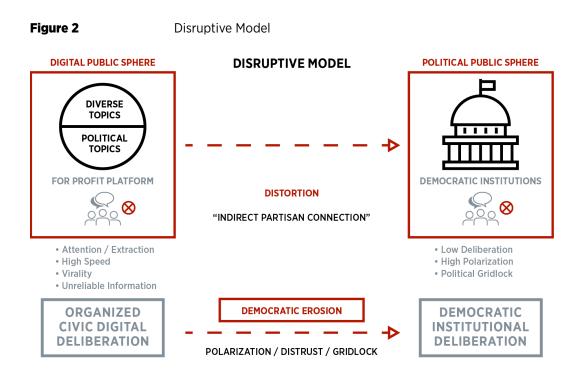
#### Policy proposal: Adapting the Lighthouse of Democracy to the Internet and Al

#### Transitioning from a disruptive to a constructive model

Large private tech companies are founded on an ad-revenue model, which requires the ceaseless extraction of citizens' attention and, as was analyzed, have developed algorithms that generate adverse mental health and social externalities. The social media models these businesses have generated do not resemble 'public squares', or comply with the conditions of the public sphere. Private corporations do not have the pursuit of the common good enshrined in their business models and, a as a result, are unlikely to create viable commercial products resembling public squares. Even if individuals can find use and purpose on existing social media, by their monopolistic nature and design, as Sociology Professor Zeynep Tufekci explains, "the totality of these interactions creates a tragedy of commons – actions that may be reasonable for individuals creates an environment which has dramatic consequences for everyone." Markets, as has been seen in the past decades, will not fulfill a role which belongs to public institutions.

As argued by Archon Fung and Joshua Cohen, "a well- functioning, democratic public sphere offers relevant and reliable information and brings different arguments and views into connection and confrontation. But with a large mix of irrelevant noise, bullshit, and expressions of hatred, and the segregation of views from one another with each segment working to deepen its own views in opposition to the others, diversity, expression, and access may be limited, despite the apparent gains. Doxxing, swarming, and threatening, for example, are familiar digital violations of the norms of common good and civility." 367

The current model of social media has resulted in a highly disruptive model, as portrayed in figure 2. The current digital public sphere, englobes 'matters of potential shared concern' discussed in digital platforms (most prominently, political discussions on social media), is functionally similar to an anarchic model, as disinformation is high, moderation low, and a focus on achieving compromises for the common good is often absent. The philosophy and social engineering of 'move fast and break things', from Mark Zuckerberg, has fulfilled its promise. It has accelerated the pace of the democratic conversation, turning reasoned deliberation into a competition for attention. It has broken the public sphere of democracies, clustering ideas by political affinity and turning civic deliberation into tribal polarization. And it has eroded the functioning of democratic institutions, because institutions inhabit the cultural medium provided by the public sphere. If the civic conversation fails, democracy cannot function.



However, as was analyzed, the problem is not in the technology, but in its governance and use. The technology of digital platforms can contribute to turn things around, as argued by technologist Aviv Ovayda.<sup>368</sup> As he explains, "in the past decade especially, countries all over the world have begun experimenting with new(ish) forms of democracy—and it turns out that some work very well. In fact, they work especially well for the messy issues that are hyperpolarized or where no powerful actor can really be trusted."<sup>369</sup> A very valuable example of 'platform democracy' provided by the author could be a citizen's assembly in the U.S. on Facebook.<sup>370</sup> In this case, Mark Zuckerberg would provide a fixed 'lump sum' to an impartial assembly facilitation organization for implementation of a "platform assembly" on a pre-defined issue. The process of digital deliberation online would then move forward.<sup>371</sup>

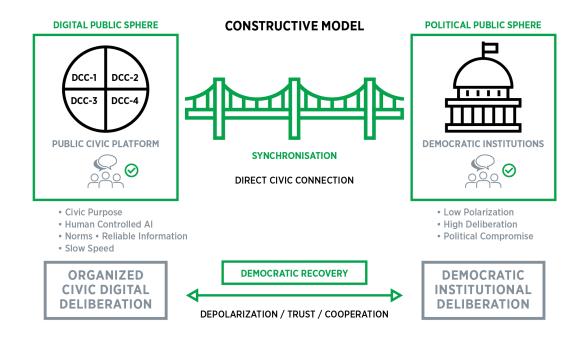
Facebook enjoys already the benefit of its size and reach, but large for-profit platforms present many externalities to the digital public sphere, as has been analyzed. Aside from their structure of incentives and all potential conflicts of interests, there is a problem of democratic legitimacy and of alignment with the common good. The technology of digital platforms can indeed contribute to turn things around, but the devil is in the detail of their governance, as digital platforms' governance and functions need to be adapted to the requirements of a well-functioning public sphere. Who and how, then, should run these platforms? After purchasing Twitter, Elon Musk tweeted "it is important to the future of civilization to have a common digital square." He might be right, but as Jack Dorsey, Twitter's cofounder and former CEO, replied "It can't be a company. This is why I left ... It can't have an advertising model ... It should be funded by a foundation." 372

This policy proposal will forward the argument that digital platforms conceived to restore trust in democracy need to be fully conceived as public services. They could be labeled public civic platforms (PCPs), rather than social media or public social media, as they should neither compete nor fully overlap with existing social media. They should only focus on matters of common public interest which pertain to the public sphere and on the fulfilment of the basic conditions to make citizen's participation possible, using e-governance solutions. There are already many models of civic technology platforms to enhance citizen's participation and deliberations, mostly at the local level (for instance, for participatory budgeting). The Obama Administration launched a website, "We the People" for citizen's petitions, but it is no longer active.<sup>373</sup>

Some of these solutions will be analyzed in the next pages. Mostly, they still lack the scale necessary to produce a substantive impact on the digital public sphere and are not associated with LLMs. The systematic development of PCPs could contribute to turn things around, as it could bring the best digital governance solutions into the scale that is required for a large impact. PCPs, specifically designed to facilitate a collective deliberation for the common good, based on reliable information, and partly empowered by public LLMs, could become safe havens of civic life. They could function as real 'digital public squares', in a way that for-profit social media cannot. Civil society, organized through 'digital Civic Communities' (DCCs), could be entrusted to manage the substantive aspects of PCPs to curate deliberations in a constructive direction.

An International Agency for Cooperation on AI for Democracy (IACAID, or Agency), open to advanced democracies and countries transitioning to democracy, could coordinate these efforts. If well-resourced and managed, PCPs and DCCs could work as digital public squares with human independent management and become the cornerstone of a democratic strategy to regenerate public trust. Under the coordination of the Agency and democratic States, they could contribute to repair the digital public sphere of democracies, build back a better democratic governance and protect the democratic home front from the authoritarian offensive. The disruptive model could pave the way to a constructive model, as seen in figure 3.

Figure 3 Constructive Model



The proposed system can be understood as a set of 'matryoshkas', or Russian nesting dolls, where each element fits into a larger, more complex one. As happens with 'matryoshkas', it is necessary for the different elements to be adequately integrated. Otherwise, the ensemble can hardly work. The four proposed elements are: public LLMs, Public Civic Platforms (PCPs), Digital Civic Communities (DCCs) and the International Agency for Cooperation on AI for Democracy (IACAID). The next pages of the proposal will address how the elements should be combined.

The notion and possible functions of public LLMs were addressed in the section "policy basis." Public LLMs, which are basically generative AI systems, such as GPT4, would be integrated within larger PCPs (PCPs would combine some elements of social media and e-governance systems and would be run by a combination of LLMs and human experts). At the same time, deliberations and other actions within PCPs would be managed by DCCs (DCCs would be civic associations aimed at furthering the common good through digital means). Finally, all public LLMs, PCPs and DCCs would operate under the framework of governance established by the Agency, which would also have certification and oversight capacities.

In sum: it is essential that humans in general and democratic institutions in particular stay fully in control of AI. AI, and public AI, can be a tool of democracy and for the common good, only if it remains under the effective control of humans, which means, of their democratic institutions. These institutions need to quickly adapt to an environment which is changing massively and quickly, because neither AI nor autocracies are going to wait for them to be ready. For democracy to remain the government 'of the People, for the People and by the People', humans need to stay in charge, and the institutions of democracy need to swiftly adapt to the change.

Some might consider that states and international organizations lack the capacities, skills, or incentives to set such a system in motion.<sup>375</sup> Some might object to it for ideological or legal considerations. In the U.S., for instance, the main obstacle could relate to objections about the state playing a substantive role in the moderation of freedom of speech, enshrined in the First Amendment. A U.S. District Judge in Louisiana has recently forbid a wide range of federal officials from communicating with social media companies to urge the removal

or demotion of constitutionally protected speech.<sup>376</sup> States, certainly, can manage the challenge of facilitating the development of PCPs, if there is adequate political will. They have already addressed and are addressing much more complicated issues.<sup>377</sup> But how to do it in a way that is effective and generates trust is the key issue. The next pages will further outline the proposal and address these understandable caveats.

## Creating safe havens: Public Civic Platforms (PCPs) as public services

#### The creation of a new public service

It is proving to be difficult for democracies to adequately regulate Big Tech, social media and AI. A transatlantic digital regulatory rift has emerged. Regulatory efforts, anti-trust measures and international cooperation on these matters need to continue and increase. Regulations, such as the ones developed by the EU (GDPR, DSA, DMA), where applied, have improved and are still improving the rights of users of online platforms, but the main business model of social media has not changed, and their negative externalities are as strong as ever. Social media are not trusted platforms of information or citizen's participation, and the core problem democratic societies are facing is distrust. Turbocharged by increasingly powerful AI algorithms, social media can become more addictive and potentially disruptive. If this path is likely, yet regulations are falling short of their purpose, additional solutions should be considered.

The concept of 'digital public square', or 'global town square' can become an excellent tool for citizen's engagement, to regenerate trust, and protect and promote democracy. But this idea should not be privately owned or locked in a for-profit system which is unsafe for democratic deliberation. It needs to be conceived as a public service. A parallel, complementary path to regulation can also be considered. It combines the notions of public service, industrial policy, and international cooperation. The first step in this path would be the development of digital Public Civic Platforms (PCPs) as public services and safe havens for civic life online. The first step in this path would be social media and enable different tools of e-governance.

The issue of financing is a central concern. Financing by a foundation or non-

profit, as suggested by Jack Dorsey, could radically change the business model and structure of incentives of social media. Digital town squares, designed to enable a constructive deliberation, not to attract and distract users, could function with a civic purpose, if the structure of incentives is adequate. To allow this model to take root and grow, a foundation or coalition of foundations could be instrumental. Several platforms are already following such a civic philosophy, as will be further explored in the section on "PCPs and social media" but, as was argued before, none of them have succeeded in reaching mainstream use yet.

This argument needs to be taken a step forward, though. Foundations or non-profits could run digital town squares but, if they were well designed and effectively functioned for the common good, they would be providing an unvaluable public service. Still, they would have to compete with for-profit social media for citizen's time and attention, which is naturally limited, and either find a way to make a revenue or incur in financial loss. And they would still lack the authoritative validation of the state as a public service.

Well-designed, well-functioning, local, national and global digital town squares need to be fully conceived as public services.<sup>380</sup> PCPs would become safe havens for civic life online and enable a 'whole of society' approach to protect and promote democracy. As such, they should be supported, sponsored and supervised by the whole infrastructure of the democratic State.<sup>381</sup> This could also solve one of the main concerns on the impact of social media on the public sphere, which is, as argued by Habermas, and mentioned previously, the blurring of "the distinction between 'public' and 'private', and thus the inclusive meaning of the public sphere."<sup>382</sup>

States should, first of all, ensure the financing of PCPs, which could be done by the general budget or by the imposition of a digital service tax (DST) on large for-profit platforms. This could remove one of the most importance 'entrance barriers' faced by civic platforms: the inadequacy of their funding to achieve large-scale results. Only this, however, may not be enough. Adequate funding does not guarantee that citizens would pay attention to PCPs. That is why these platforms should not replicate the functions of social media, nor be too focused on a particular civic activity. They should include a wide range of functions, in order to achieve scale.

#### **PCPs functions**

PCPs should allow citizens to manage their whole civic life through a single digital point of entry. For that, they should mirror the public sphere and enable an adequate access to all public services. Through a single platform, citizens should be able to deliberate online, forward petitions and proposals to institutions, access government's messages and pay their taxes. Functionality would drive scalability. And scale would bring impact. This proposal suggests PCPs to focus on four tracks of activities:

- 1. The distribution of fact-based verified information
- 2. The organization of community deliberations to achieve objectives of common interest
- 3. The support of citizens' access to democratic processes and public services
- 4. The management of political differences through dialogue and mediation

PCPs could take advantage of the latest developments of AI and benefit from multiple synergies with the public LLMs. PCPs, though, would not be entirely digital and would need to be adequately staffed by human teams, capable of exerting an adequate and permanent oversight of their functioning and that of the associated LLMs. The systemic cooperation between highly sophisticated AI, designed with a narrow and specific public purpose, and groups of human experts, could enable PCPs to achieve the facilitation of their four tracks of activities. As a result:

- If the distribution of fact-based verified information is effective, PCPs would work as trust-enabling systems and contribute to the regeneration of the digital public sphere of democracies. In the fulfilment of this function, PCPs would be facilitating the role of public broadcasters.
- If the organization of constructive collective deliberations is effective, PCPs would work as community-building systems. In the fulfilment of this function, PCPs would be facilitating the role of community organizers and CSOs.
- If the support of citizen's access to democratic processes and public services is ambitious enough, and institutions open-up adequate avenues to channel

this participation, PCPs would also contribute to re-synchronize the public sphere with the political public sphere, bringing the political system back to a better balance. <sup>384</sup> In the fulfilment of this function, PCPs would be providing a new 'bridge of dialogue' between the different demos and their public representatives.

• If, finally, the management of political differences can be accomplished with the assistance of online mediation, PCPs would become depolarizing and deradicalizing systems. In the fulfilment of this function, PCPs would be facilitating the role of political mediation and conflict resolution.

PCPs themselves would not take the role of broadcasters, community organizers, institutions of representative democracy, or mediators. PCPs would be public digital platforms, designed to 'facilitate' a 'whole of society' approach aimed at ensuring democratic cohesion and resilience by ensuring the availability of civic dialogue and engagement based on reliable information. Given their public nature and purpose, PCPs would need to ensure adequate ID verification. This requirement would be necessary for the good governance of the platforms, to ensure compliance with their rules and standards, and even for something as basic as to ascertain that there's a real human being at the other side, and not an AI-bot. Other than ID verification, there would be no harvesting of private data, for commercial or any other purposes, as PCPs would not be designed for that purpose in the first place.

#### PCPs, social media and examples of civic platforms

PCPs should not be developed as substitutes for social media. There are already too many, competing for citizen's attention. 388 PCPs would provide citizens with a public option that they can trust to access reliable information and engage with other citizens constructively, without the fear that their privacy could be compromised, or that their ideas and proposals could become fodder of partisan ideological warfare. Insofar, they would be safe havens for civic life. But PCPs would not enter the "social" dimension of social media and could even help social media refocus their efforts on the core nature of their business, which is providing social connections, not becoming digital "public squares" or de facto organizers of political debates. The complementarity with for-profit social media could happen by allowing the redirection of the anarchic political conversation that takes place in social media towards PCPs. 389 Social media themselves could be interested

in providing adequate avenues for this redirecting to take place, as the burden of check-proving information and managing a civic engagement online is too burdensome and sensitive for them.<sup>390</sup>

As was already mentioned, there are already many initiatives of civic social media and digital apps and tools designed to facilitate citizens' deliberation and democratic participation. Most of them, though, lack the funding or scale to be able to have a systemic and sustained social impact. Mastodon has been one of the most visible, it offers a decentralized and community-driven experience, but its adoption and impact are still limited. Participedia, an innovative global crowdsourcing platform, has a focus on public participation and democratic innovations. Its adoption is also still limited. The sector, though, is moving very fast, and AI will further accelerate changes. As explained by Science Policy Expert and Journalist Bina Venkataraman: "Innovators are creating ranking systems that would enable people to vote on a community's content-moderation algorithm based on what it amplifies and suppresses, rather than accept a single company's default strategy. Researchers are working on algorithms that would 'bridge' divides, amplifying not what's causing strong reactions but what people of various persuasions, whether political affiliations or musical tastes, agree on." 391

Some of the most promising initiatives so far are being implemented with public leadership or support, but mostly at the local level. An example would be Decide Madrid, a civic technology platform created in 2015 to promote citizen participation in policymaking and improve governance in the city. Participatory budgeting is one of the most often used tools and it is being employed in many cities and local communities across the world. Ambitious experiences, though, have also been applied at national level. As was mentioned earlier, the Obama Administration launched a website, "We the People", which is no longer active. South Korea's "e-government" is one of the most advanced systems of e-governance worldwide. Ireland has used a system of deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) to bring ordinary citizens to deliberate on public policy issues. 394

The EU itself developed "EuroPolis", an experiment to assess "how political and social attitudes toward European Union (EU) issues change as a result of exposure to information, and what implications this has for political participation and voter turnout." It functioned as a deliberative polity-making project, and also used DMPs from across the continent to deliberate on matters of common interest. 396 It

achieved positive results and, as argued by Fishkin at al, the mini-public or microcosmic version of the EU wide public sphere is a viable democratic tool: "If there is at some point enough interest in bringing the people of Europe into decisions in a thoughtful and representative way, then the mini-public version can be convened."<sup>397</sup> Citizens' juries, deliberative polls, and citizens' assemblies are increasingly being used worldwide. But Taiwan's digital democracy is possibly the most advanced and ambitious initiative in this regard and will be further examined in the section dedicated to track 3 Supportive DCCs.

PCPs would provide a massive step forward in the direction of ensuring that citizens of democracies have access to reliable information and ample opportunities to participate digitally in the democratic life of their communities and countries, not in opposition with the elected bodies of representative democracy, but in collaboration with them. Digital technologies allow a deepened cooperation between the citizen's public sphere and the political public sphere. In the same way that postal services or public broadcasters were created in the past to facilitate communications and the flow of information within democracies, PCPs could become public services in the digital public sphere. Past and existing systems and experiences of civic platforms and participatory e-democracy at local level, or experiences in countries such as Ireland, the RoK and Taiwan, or even at the EU level, could be taken as a model for implementing an international network of safe havens for civic life and the protection and promotion of democracy.

In most advanced Western democracies, public postal services and public broadcasters coexist with private providers of the same or similar services. What public postal services and public broadcasters do is to ensure that a safe, reliable, public option, designed with a public service mission, is available to all citizens. A civic media public service is nowadays required and cannot be outsourced to large for-profit social media. As argued by Martin Wolf, "the more the functions of the State are commercialized, the more difficult preservation of a public service ethos becomes". The 2019 Knight report also recognizes that "the free market may not create all the forms of networks that would benefit democratic and open societies", and states that "much as a healthy media ecosystem needs both for-profit and nonprofit players, the internet market deserves the same." PCPs should do what social media cannot do, which is the public service dimension of their activity and additional e-governance tasks.

Ensuring universal and effective access to reliable information and facilitating citizens' free and equal constructive participation are the two main pillars to restore trust and depolarize. Both pillars have a clear digital dimension in the present day. The process, certainly, would only produce effects in the long term and if applied systematically. Democratic recovery is unlikely to be achieved with quick, short-term fixes, as it requires cultural change. Unlike autocracy, democracy is a craft that requires patience and constant care. That is why it is historically rare in massive societies. In the U.S., for instance, the social and political upswing generated during the Progressive Era was a slow and steady process, that took decades to materialize.

The U.S. that won WWII and built the liberal world order was the result of that patient communitarian effort. It may still be the richest and most powerful country on Earth, but it has lost social capital, democratic resilience and soft power. It will have to recover from these losses and build up a large and robust democratic alliance with its closest democratic partners, and especially with the EU, the largest Union of liberal democracies in the world, to protect and rebuild the world order. PCPs could provide the necessary safe online havens for a new democratic upswing to start taking root worldwide. To be fruitful, though, the effort will have to follow a "whole of society approach" and mobilize civil society and institutions.

### The role of human civil society and institutions: Digital Civic Communities (DCCs)

"We do not know how to control these things".400

- Geoffrey Hinton, Pioneer Al scientist

The main challenge would be to ensure an adequate human control and democratic governance of the new public service of PCP. This is essential, to counter the risk of these platforms being used in the wrong way.<sup>401</sup> Humans will have to control PCPs and their AI components. More concretely, a human institution should be entrusted with this role. AI will affect every aspect of life,

and in the political sphere, regulating it will be essential to protect democracy. The EU is preparing to adopt the AI Act, which will be an important step forward in. The U.S. and other countries are still lagging behind, and China (and other autocracies) will increasingly use AI as a tool of state surveillance and population control. Regulatory efforts must speed up dramatically. The creation of PCPs can be instrumental.

If created, PCPs would only affect a small portion of the digital traffic on the Internet. As 'safe havens', however, they could be used as 'sandboxes' to experiment on large-scale systems to enable a human control of AI. The experimental systems developed for the inner governance of PCPs could inform better regulations of AI and social media across the board. Teams of experts would have to control public LLMs within PCPs. These teams of human operators, though, might be well suited to exercise a technical oversight of the platforms and their AI components, but they would not be in an adequate position to manage the human governance of PCPs. Who is to ensure that the information provided by public civic platforms is reliable? Who could ensure that citizens can engage in constructive deliberations within PCPs?

Even if central to democracies, many public services, as was analyzed, have been affected by the same crisis of distrust that is corroding democratic politics and institutions. If PCPs were to be developed, the central task would be to design them in a way that would generate a sufficient level of public support. The biggest challenge may be to attract citizens from across the political spectrum of democracies to the PCPs and explain the nature of the new public service. Adequate funding and broad functionality would contribute to sort some obstacles, but not all. The central, critical question of trust would remain. Three actions can be considered in this regard:

1. Public campaigns: public campaigns can be developed to explain PCPs and their public service nature to society, with special attention to the sectors of the population than could benefit most from them (minors, vulnerable sectors of society, persons with disabilities, elders, etc). E-governance elements could be highlighted, to underscore that PCPs are meant to facilitate citizen's access to diverse public services, and equal access to the digital public sphere.

- 2. Phased-implementation: the introduction of PCPs can first be implemented for educational purposes. Social media have detrimental effects on mental health, particularly of children and teenagers. Regulations may increasingly ban or limit the use of social media for minors. Bans, though, are difficult to implement. PCPs can become a valuable educational tool and can be used to teach students how to safely develop a civic online presence. As PCPs would be digital safe havens, they could also become effective alternatives to social media for minors.
- 3. Civil society leadership: Digital Civic Communities (DCCs) could be created as the drivers of the information and communication process within the PCPs. They could provide "built-in" checks and balances of the system, to prevent its abuse, from governments or other actors. This proposed action requires a thorough explanation.

As has been repeatedly stated, technology is not the problem, its governance and use is. Hence, it is necessary to ensure an adequate governance structure of PCPs, unlike the one existing in private social media. As argued by Bina Venkataraman, "Better online communities won't grow from the same kinds of ideas, companies and thinkers who got us here. The next era should be shaped by the wide public it will serve."<sup>403</sup> PCPs, being public, would need a much more robust system to ensure their credibility and accountability amongst the larger public.<sup>404</sup> They should be human-centered and ensure an adequate human-algorithm balance, where humans and human institutions permanently stay in control of AI processes.

But, to remain independent and neutral, PCPs would also need to be separate from government political influence in all functions unrelated to e-governance. Their role would be more effective if they do not work as new branches of government but retain their own autonomy. In the U.S., for instance, as was mentioned, there are concerns about government interfering in any possible way with the freedom of speech enshrined in the First Amendment. <sup>405</sup> For this and other related issues concerning public trust, governments should not participate in the curation of civic deliberations withing PCPs. PCPs would need to rely on and cooperate with other actors from civil society to perform this task. As Habermas argued, the (citizen's) "public sphere" and the "political public sphere" are distinct.

This proposal agrees that these spheres are distinct but considers that digital technologies can enable adequate ways of communication and cooperation

between both. As such, the digital public sphere as mediated by PCPs can be synchronized with public institutions, as was reflected in the constructive model in figure 3. There are many examples of such cooperation within liberal democracies. A case in point would be public universities: they receive public funding but have full autonomy from government, within the existing laws and regulations. Most often, public funding within democracies does not undermine freedom of speech, but it enhances it.<sup>406</sup>

Therefore, the role of curating deliberations within PCPs should be entrusted to DCCs. Credited social organizations, new digital communities, and citizens, could form DCCs and become the main drivers of PCPs, as long as they are independent themselves, and their main focus is the public interest. The actors and their roles would differ, depending on the area of activity, but they would be entrusted in all cases with the promotion of democratic responsibility within PCPs. <sup>407</sup> The judiciary would ultimately ensure that DCCs act within their constitutional and legal limits and mandates, and so would the IACAID (as will be later explained). The rest of this section will consider the roles of these civic communities in the four tracks of activity of PCPs. As was already mentioned, the following lines provide an "idealized sketch" of a possible architecture for a well-functioning digital public sphere. Many challenges would arise, foreseen and unforeseen.

## Track 1. DCCs for the distribution of fact-based verified information (Informative DCCs)

Well-regulated, independent public broadcasters could be the main anchors of these DCCs. 408 In partnership with other independent media outlets, associations and cooperatives of journalism, and academia, they could form "Informative DCCs", under the framework established by the IACAD and their country of origin. Their mission would be to curate the distribution of fact-based verified information within the PCPs. 409 These DCCs could functionally work as "digital alliances for independent journalism."

The rationale for the creation of these DCCs would be that ensuring a provision of reliable information is essential for a well-functioning public sphere and a high-quality democracy. Archon Fung and Joshua Cohen argue that "perhaps the best cure for fake news is not to suppress it but rather to increase access to better information that is both informative and reliable: raise the floor instead of imposing

ceilings. In the mass- media era, good news was produced (however imperfectly) by professional journalists."410 Today, as they mention, platform companies, governments, and citizens can do more to finance good news.411

The PCP audience would rely on trustworthy track 1 DCCs to obtain their information. As DCC-1 anchors, public broadcasters, in accordance with international and domestic democratic codes and norms of independent journalism, would set the general parameters of information that could flow through PCPs. This implies that track 1 DCCs should establish a system to constantly monitor the truthfulness of all information shared within PCPs, with the collaboration of public LLMs. Some systems are already in place. Independent, journalistic fact- checking websites (such as PolitiFact, Snopes, and FactCheck.org) can help provide inputs for platform judgments (in some geographies). 413

Credited news outlets of independent journalism from across the political spectrum could be important strategic partners of public broadcasters within DCC-1.<sup>414</sup> The development of a system of partnerships between media outlets within PCPs would be aligned with several recommendations of the 2019 Knight report, including the recommendation to "encourage more collaboration among journalism entities at all levels", the recommendation to "develop non-profit mission-driven journalistic entities (Community News Organizations, or CNOs)," the recommendation to "use technology to enhance journalism's roles in fostering democracy", or the recommendation to "build a news and information ecosystem that reflects the diversity of individual communities and our nation".<sup>415</sup>

Such partnerships could include a system of economic compensation for private news outlets that share news in PCPs. The financing model of independent journalism has been shattered by the loss of advertising revenue that has flowed, amongst other places, to large social media platforms. Trustworthy information being a public good, it should be appropriately funded. Revenue from a possible DST could be then returned to media and journalists participating in track 1 DCCs. All 7

Partnerships could also be especially useful to support outlets that operate at the local level, since communities across the West have experienced the decimation of a rich ecosystem of local media, eroding trust and comity in rural areas, and contributing to the rise of political polarization. DCC-1 partnerships would also

be particularly helpful to distribute academic work and make it more accessible to the general public. Informative DCCs would organize themselves internally with great autonomy, with the only limitation of having to abide by the general framework of governance and code of conduct approved by the IACAID and the laws and rules applicable in the different countries.

Different PCPs could follow different information strategies: in some countries, PCPs might prefer to only facilitate information provided by established Informative DCCs; other PCPs, though, might opt for a more open strategy, allowing, like social media does, user generated content (UGC), but always under a system of supervision by DCC-1. In this case, the combination of a system of ID verification, a platform design that would impede viralization, and the role of Informative DCCs in monitoring information's trustworthiness, would drain deepfakes, general disinformation and hate speech, ensuring that PCPs would be reliable sources of information. Even if UGC was allowed, this would not make track 1 DCCs "digital public squares." Their mission would be informing. Not "more" or "faster," but "better" and "deeper." There should be a clear separation between the role of informing the public, and the role of assisting citizens' efforts of collective deliberation. 418

PCPs can help democratic societies maintain and support independent journalism, as the proposed model keeps it at the center of the design. Through the constitution of Informative DCCs, the model would entrust journalists with the responsibility of using AI as a tool and would not allow AI systems to take over any editorial responsibilities. Under track 1, PCPs would provide the kind of information that democracies and deliberative communities in general need to function. Verified, accurate. Pedagogic, when necessary. Trustworthy and human, always. Citizens would know where to look for, when searching for information online. PCPs, under the direction of a credited alliance of independent journalists, would be safe havens of reliable information. Independent journalism must be at the center of the efforts to repair the lighthouse of democracy.

## Track 2. DCCs for the organization of constructive community deliberations to achieve objectives of common interest (Deliberative DCCs)

Academia, or associations of CSOs-existing or to be created- could be the anchors of these DCCs. In partnership with unions, CSOs, cooperatives, charities, and citizen juries, they could form "Deliberative DCCs", under the framework established by the IACAD and their respective country of origin. The inner structure of these Deliberative DCCs could be tripartite: academia would form the first tier, CSOs and other existing organizations would form the second one, and citizen juries the third one. Randomly selected citizens would form part of these deliberative juries, which would collaborate with existing organizations and academia within DCCs. The mission of track 2-DCCs would be to promote and facilitate community deliberations within PCPs, transforming them in "digital public squares." 422

Paul Hawken has described the social and environmental movement as the largest on Earth, although it's lacking any single leadership or structure. 423 Whether this conception is accurate, and whether the diverse landscape of non-profits and community organizations can be considered a "movement", with at least some basic cohesion and unity of purpose, is debatable. It possibly depends on the perspective and level of abstraction applied. What is clear, though, is that CSOs, environmental, social, humanitarian, civil rights, etc., are filling a very important void left by the decrease of unionization and other communitarian associations in Western liberal democracies. And they are deploying major efforts to face the multiple crisis that the world and most societies are facing, trying to reach out to the rest of the citizenship.

Even if in the last decades -as Putnam explains-, the membership rate of CSOs, and the level of engagement of members, has been declining, CSOs represent one of the major pillars of comity and civic commitment in modern democracies. They are the most relevant actors advocating for social justice, environmental protection, human rights and the common good. The ceaseless efforts of thousands of CSOs, communities and activists have created the social awareness that has later allowed political leaders to adopt courageous reforms, in matters such as civil rights or the protection of the environment. There would have been no Paris Agreement absent a strong and sustain push of CSOs, communities,

and activists. <sup>424</sup> Deliberative DCCs would facilitate an active and systemic collaboration between existing CSOs and communities, academia, and citizen juries representative of the broad citizenship. This would strengthen trust and comity and the pursuit of the common good. The next big climate agreement, for instance, will need an even stronger and better coordinated push by the civil society than in the past, given the higher fragmentation of formal political processes, both at national and international level. Deliberative DCCs can be instrumental to better articulate this and other societal efforts.

The creation of a three-tiered structure of DCCs could be useful to enhance trust, depolarize and reduce the fragmentation of the public sphere. The reason is that this system would enable and incentivize the cooperation of academia, diverse CSOs, and citizens. <sup>425</sup> CSOs and communities with different missions and ideological background may find it difficult to cooperate. Academia and citizen juries could moderate their differences. CSOs would find benefits in cooperating within PCPs, rather than competing for attention and resources. Cooperation would be rewarded by reaching to larger audiences. It would also contribute to decrease social media's tendency to create "semi-publics." <sup>426</sup>

Deliberative DCCs could follow different strategies: some might opt to organize small groups of experts to deliberate on sectorial interests (civil rights, environment, local issues, etc), to be followed by discussions at larger groups, less homogeneous and like-minded. Others may opt to organize larger fora to discuss topics of cross-cutting nature. All DCCs, however, should establish ways to enable the participation of interested citizens in their deliberations. Public LLMs would be an essential instrument of the organization of these deliberations. Until the development of generative AI, it has not been technically possible to adequately "scale-up" civic dialogue in large democracies. Technology, with adequate human and societal guidance, may now provide an opportunity for this endeavor.

The formation of large and diverse civil society coalitions and the presentation of moderate, constructive proposals would be essential to attract citizens to the debates. DCCs may be the drivers of PCPs, but as a public service these platforms are meant to allow the entrance and participation of all interested citizens and reach the largest possible audience, in accordance with the conditions of a well-functioning public sphere.<sup>430</sup> The combination of the system of ID verification and

the role of Deliberative DCCs as moderators would allow the organization within PCPs of constructive citizens' deliberations, in a way that for-profit social media cannot provide. Their mission would not be to promote outrage, or "guilt", but understanding, and "sharing."

PCPs would provide the kind of civic dialogue in the digital public sphere that democracies and organizations in general need to function. They would be designed to help citizens build bridges to discuss issues of common interest, for them particularly and for society as a whole, to weave back social consensus. <sup>431</sup> It can be argued that democracies already have their institutional bodies of elected representatives, and that direct democracy, or processes that emulate it, is unmanageable and dangerous. The Framers of the U.S. Constitution were particularly suspicious about this. <sup>432</sup> The reality, though, is that social media are already providing digital spaces that citizens are de facto using as "digital public squares", and that elected representatives are constantly paying attention to the conversations that arise in social media (on Facebook, Twitter or, more recently, TikTok), and even using these social media to "interact" with citizens. This is the disruptive model described in figure 2. The Framers would most likely not have approved this reality, which they could not predict anyway. It is now with us.

The situation is paradoxical, because social media have not been designed to promote a civic and constructive deliberation, and their negative externalities are well known. Many ideas and proposals that move forward in social media are too often informed by passions and emotions, including anger and fear. Strong emotions generate clicks, attention, virality, the energy that keeps the business model of social media running. It is detrimental to democracy. Collective deliberation, if well managed, can be extremely helpful to regenerate trust on liberal democracy. It would be better to place it under the leadership of communities and organizations that know how to manage it, rather than on forprofit corporations that lack a real interest on civic life. 433

Track 2 DCCs could be particularly useful to deliberate on critical questions related to democratic governance, distrust and polarization, from the financing of political parties, to gerrymandering, electoral modalities (including rank choice voting), or the reform of institutions. They could also coordinate to organize synchronic deliberations amongst dozens of "digital public squares" within several PCPs across different democratic countries. This could be done on matters of

common global interest. A possible set of deliberations could involve ideas and actions to combat climate change, an issue where a wider and deeper involvement of interested citizens could be especially fruitful. On matters of global, systemic and inter-generational public interest, promoting a higher involvement of world citizens would be ethically and politically advisable. And, aside from informing democracies of their deliberations, they could also inform International Organizations, and namely the UN, which already has multiple channels of participation of NGOs, but not a platform which is designed to also include millions of citizens in the process of collective deliberation for the common good.

The system of representative democracy was already disrupted by the development of social media. It is necessary to acknowledge that democracy cannot properly function in a social media environment designed to move fast and break things, as it is a system that is depleting trust and eroding the public sphere of our societies. To protect and restore democracy, reliable information is necessary, but not enough. New spaces for the development of civic dialogue are also essential to repair the lighthouse of democracy.

## Track 3. DCCs for the support of citizens' access to democratic processes and public services

Track 3 DCCs could provide citizens with all the possibilities of e-governance of the particular state of reference. Therefore, "Supportive DCCs" should include public institutions as central actors and main anchors. Informative DCCs rely on independent media and Deliberative DCCs on civil society. Supportive DCCs should also include independent media and civil society, including academia and citizen juries, but as partners of public institutions, who would be the main drivers of their work.

Supportive DCCs' structure would be quadripartite: the first tier would be formed by public institutions, the second by media, the third by CSOs and the fourth by citizen juries. The purpose of track 3 DCCs would be to support citizens' access to democratic processes and public services. They would work as "digital bridges" between institutions and citizens. This would be the only segment of PCPs with direct government involvement. It would align the "political public sphere" with the "citizen's public sphere", to enable a more fruitful and transparent process of transforming the public opinion into public policies.

Once citizens have had access to reliable information (track 1) and to a constructive deliberation (track 2), some may wish to increase their level of engagement and participate more proactively in any democratic processes that are open to citizens. Exercising the right to vote and participating in elections would be the most basic one. Even if these issues are mostly solved in all advanced democracies, some are facing challenges in this regard. Aside from voting in elections, there are many other ways to participate in the political process in modern democracies. Referenda, popular initiatives, recalls, petitions or participatory budgeting processes are nowadays common mechanisms of direct or participatory democracy. They are usually more often applied at local or regional level, but sometimes also at national level. The Internet and the development of e-governance has made participatory democracy much more feasible and common. Where applied, it almost always coexists remarkably well with the institutions of representative democracy.

With the assistance of public LLMs, track 3 DCCs could support citizens' engagement in many or most mechanisms of participatory democracy. They could do so by, first of all, by informing them of the existing channels (which are often ignored by most citizens). Secondly, they could assist them on accessing the information which is relevant to the particular process they want to engage with and redirect them to any possible previous deliberations on the matter. Thirdly, they could become drivers of democratic mobilization, proactively encouraging and promoting citizens' participation, and making it clear that their voice, ideas and engagement matters.

If democratic governments become especially involved in the process, expanding enough avenues of citizen's participation, advanced liberal democracies could well evolve into "participatory liberal democracies", and synchronize the institutions of representative democracy with the best methods of direct democracy. As Audrey Tang, digital minister of Taiwan, explained in 2022, "Taiwan's digital democracy can be seen as a precursor in this regard. On the country's online platform, anyone can file a petition. There is no need to be affiliated with any political party.

Twice a month, for petitions that gather 5,000 signatures, we hold face-to-face collaborative meetings across related ministries to explore ways to incorporate them into policymaking." Taiwan's 'digital democracy' is possibly one of the most remarkable examples of symbiosis between government institutions, civil society, industry and tech to develop an advanced participatory democracy.

True, Taiwan is a very particular case, and it holds some of the most advanced technologies in the world. It's democracy, though, is very young, and its means are not larger than those of Western countries. The success of its "digital democracy" is not even mainly a technological prowess. As Sam Robbins argues, "What is impressive about Taiwan is that there is a government working to implement an open government and open parliament plan, including the implementation of 'participation officers to increase openness in transparency across all government agencies (...). Indeed, the most awe-inspiring facets of Taiwan are often not digital at all, but rather that a critical mass of people and government effort is being placed on slowly building channels of dialogue."439 It is not only Taiwan that has embarked on such project of digital participation, although its model is possibly the most ambitious in the world. South Korea and Ireland have followed this path, too. Ireland, for instance, established a deliberative assembly in 2016 to advise the Irish Parliament on abortion and on the question to be put to the people in a referendum. 440 Local institutions are also trying novel systems of e-governance and e-democracy.

Supporting citizens' access and engagement with democratic processes would only be one part of the role of track 3 DCCs. Supporting their access to public services would be the second part of their role. Following the guidance of institutions, they could link e-governance webpages and tools to the PCPs, generating a single point of entrance for citizens to interact with their governments, at local, regional or national level. This, as was explained, is also important to scale-up PCPs. This way, citizens would have the possibility of accessing all their administrative information and carry out all their legal and administrative demarches (taxes, health, etc), easily. This could provide a useful public service particularly for vulnerable populations, which often do not know the rights and mechanisms of support that are available to them.<sup>441</sup>

Supportive DCCs would assist them in being able to exercise their rights and come into the radar and protection of governments. PCPs could be a tool to advance in social cohesion and justice, and the protection of those who most need public services. E-governance mechanisms are already relatively advanced in some advanced democracies, but not in all.<sup>442</sup> Navigating interactions with the different public administrations can still be extremely complicated and burdensome in many countries. Differences are also wide within countries, depending on the region, the kind of public service in question, etc. The creation

of PCPs could help the less-digitalized Administrations to close the e-governance gap with the most advanced ones.

The development of a transnational network of PCPs amongst democracies could also facilitate the coordination of authorities' messages to their populations on matters of important or urgent international interest, such as pandemics, natural disasters, or wars. A robust and reliable network of democratic PCPs could cut through the noise and disinformation generated in social media, to make citizens know where to find credible information. The fact that governments currently rely on social media for purposes of public information is a vulnerability, as private platforms mix truth and fake, responsibility and anarchy, in a way that is profoundly unreliable. This challenge is only going to grow as AI generated deep fakes flood and clog the existing channels of communication, rendering them useless as vehicles for governments and institutions public messages. Churchill and FDR made of public and private broadcasters important instruments of their public communication during WWII. Democratic leaders could use PCPs, when the need arises.<sup>443</sup>

Track 3 DCCs could create a large impact to increase citizens' trust on democratic institutions, as they would facilitate the interactions between citizens and their governments and make democratic processes and public services more transparent and accessible. Citizens often compare poorly funded public services with the efficient provision of goods and services by large, wealthy corporations. With the assistance of digital technologies, the quality of public services could improve substantially, increasing citizens' trust. Supportive DCCs could become useful tools to develop better systems of e-governance and more responsive democracies. Developing effective mechanisms to help citizens engage with democratic processes and public services can also be essential elements to repair the lighthouse of democracy.

## Track 4. DCCs for the management of political differences through dialogue and mediation

Last, Mediating DCCs could take shape, to form "digital depolarizing alliances." All DCC models are conceived as depolarizing and trust-enhancing public solutions, but track-4 DCCs would have depolarization and the management of disputes as their single objective. Their structure could be tripartite. One

tier would include CSOs and religious congregations committed to mediation, another one academia and the third one citizen juries. As other DCCs, they would operate under the framework provided by the IACAID and their country of origin. 444 Several CSOs have developed relevant skills to facilitate the resolution of conflicts through dialogue and mediation. This has also been done by some religious congregations, which are also essential to promote interfaith dialogue. Alliances of these organizations could be entrusted as main anchors of Mediating DCCs, to develop a public service aimed at furthering tolerance amongst citizens.

The main dimension of this role could be developed online. Difficult deliberations within other DCCs could be redirected towards Mediating DCCs. This dialogue would need to be thoroughly prepared and guided. Citizens involved in the dispute would need to agree to certain standards of behavior and be informed of possible consequences in case of misbehavior (including the use of insults and threats). As argued by Archon Fung and Joshua Coen, "fostering participant responsibilities must play a central role in remedying the deficiencies of the digital public sphere in order to capture some of the desirable qualities of the mass media public sphere."<sup>445</sup>

The use of videoconferencing solutions might be especially useful for these dialogues, as text alone would most likely not suffice. Seeing human faces, even if through a screen, humanize interactions. Guidance and pedagogy can also have an important depolarizing effect. A 2022 megastudy has found 23 short interventions that significantly reduce partisan animosity, like videos and informational messages. 446 Providing people corrective information that fixes misperceptions on political opponents' stances decreases the support to political violence and democratic backsliding from their own party. Two of the authors of the megastudy, Willer and Voelkel, have expressed hope "that the project's results will be a useful resource for organizations, political leaders, and social media platforms looking to foster a healthy democratic environment."447 In a PBS interview, Willer explained that cable news and social media platforms do not have "a lot of motivation to take action on this problem, in fact, they may have the reverse, they may be benefiting from polarization and from increasing it. You don't have any obvious actors who have an interest in and the means to effectively intervene on this problem."448

PCPs could be the actors entrusted to implement the toolkit of trust enabling and depolarizing solutions that are being developed. In the U.S., for instance, Mediating DCCs could implement novel solutions for citizens to discuss issues such as abortion, gun control and other topics of the so-called "culture wars". The 2019 Knight report provides some examples of local civic dialogues to rebuild trust and bridge divisions, such as LocalVoicesNetwork, Deliberation Day, Citizen University or America's Civic Square. Professor Peter T. Coleman also provides different examples and experiences on this matter in his book *The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization*. He explains how it is possible to generate "virtuous cycles" to depolarize and achieve sustainable peace, from Costa Rica, New Zealand and the Nordic countries to counties or regions in the U.S., Australia, Brazil or India. 450

With the assistance of public LLMs, and the guidance of track 4 DCCs, PCPs could contribute to scale-up and standardize the best international practices. Their end-goal does not need be to depolarize by reaching common agreements -although this could be a positive side effect of their job-, but rather to guide citizens on how to respect peers with different views, and to weave back social trust and common ground. A society of fully like-minded people is neither possible nor desirable. A society geared towards enmity and violence is possible, but extremely undesirable and dangerous. Patience and time are essential components to move in the direction of a culture of understanding and respect, and those ingredients cannot be found in the social media business model. PCPs, with the collaboration of Mediating DCCs, could provide such a model.

The PCP-DCC framework relies on a combination of technology, including AI, and humans. Humans, individuals and organizations, are at the cusp of the model. This is particularly important for track 4 DCCs. Often, videoconferencing might not suffice. PCPs could become platforms of coordination for in-person meetings. Many track-4 processes might need to be redirected to physical settings. This level of organization is obviously very challenging, but there is no reason to immediately deploy the full arsenal of governance tools and mechanisms that could be implemented through PCPs. Difficult dialogues which require mediation and even physical presence can be developed first through pilot projects, in experimental settings. As CSOs, religious congregations and academia would have a central role to play, they could also provide their members and students with opportunities for volunteering in the process. The best solutions could later be standardized.

Developing effective mechanisms to help citizens discuss their differences in a civic way can be the fourth essential element to repair the lighthouse of democracy. Logically, not all solutions can be developed online. But digital tools can be better used to organize large-scale social arrangements, which can be good for democracy. None of these solutions are new, many are all well-known and widely used, in different setting across advanced societies and worldwide. For-profit social media are not the adequate digital platforms to address the social and political challenges and threats to democracy. Public Civic Platforms, driven by CSOs, independent journalists, academia, communities, citizen juries, etc, and open to the entire civil society, could become powerful public services to protect and promote democracy worldwide.

### The Lighthouse: The AI for Democracy system (AI4D)

Modern, liberal democracies are not well equipped to face the simultaneous challenge brought about by the politics of aggression, intimidation and interference of autocracies, the growth of populism, far-right extremism and authoritarianism worldwide, and the systemic impact of social media and generative AI, in a world which is also increasingly ravaged by the effects of climate change, pandemics and war. The solutions to face these "multi-crises" and protect and promote democracy, will not be easy.

Open, profound and constructive deliberations are needed to try to provide answers to the following question: what ideas can shape the strategies of democracies to better navigate the current global maelstrom of distrust that is disfiguring them and the liberal world order? The development of PCPs and DCCs can be part of the solution, as it would provide an efficient framework of action for democracies to be able to restore trust on democratic governance through the creation of a new public service that would result in the establishment of an ambitious digital archipelago of safe havens. Governments would provide a policy setting that would enable the cooperation of longstanding credited civic institutions on digital public civic platforms, to explore and promote solutions for the common good.

Putnam has argued that an increase of comity and cooperation allowed the U.S. to escape the deep inequities and divisions of the Gilded Age to become a more equal, fair and stable society. In the 2020's, a new democratic upswing would require mobilizing the same energies of civism that characterized the Progressive

Era, using the best instruments at the disposal of democracies nowadays. The restoration of well-functioning public spheres within democracies should be a priority. PCPs and DCCs can be such instruments. The same digital technologies that would make them possible, would also allow to use them at international scale, as a bulwark to protect and regenerate the liberal world order. Public civic platforms and digital civic communities could set the basis of the "AI for Democracy system" (AI4D), a process conceived to protect and promote democracy in the midst of the global maelstrom of distrust that is eroding it from its core.

If the combined soft power of democracies is leveraged to better articulate a common narrative of a more equitable and peaceful liberal world order, the lighthouse of democracy could drain autocracies' hopes of breaking this order for their own purposes. The ideological rearmament of liberal democracy is more important and relevant to navigate the maelstrom, than doubling down on military or technological superiority. If the West manages to "heal the Achilles' heel" of its social and political divisions and attract the Global South to its vision of world order, the democratic core of the liberal world order would be revitalized. In such a scenario, Russia, and more importantly China, will find more reasons to gradually abandon their confrontational course. In the mid to long-term, the new Cold War in the making might pave the way to a new détente or cold peace, where serious discussions of global governance could be reinvigorated.

To move in that direction, democracies could create the "AI for Democracy" system (AI4D), building upon the PCP-DCC model. As was mentioned already, this is an "idealized framework", which would face many challenges, foreseen and unforeseen. The AI4D system could be developed in three phases:

- 1. Establishment of the IACAID by and for advanced democracies.
- 2. Opening up of the IACAID to countries transitioning to democracy.
- 3. Development of partnerships with other interested countries.

# Establishment of the International Agency for Cooperation on Al for Democracy (IACAID) by and for advanced democracies

An Agency could be established to coordinate the national development of PCPs and DCCs. The IACAID would establish the basic parameters of technical and democratic governance, including the optimal AI-human ratio, of the PCPs and DCCs, and provide assistance to countries for the development of the system. Countries would be able to develop their own preferred models of PCPs and DCCs, within the parameters established by the Agency. The Agency would certify the PCP and DCC proposals presented by the Member States that meet the relevant criteria. It would also exercise adequate oversight, ensuring adequate accountability of the system and thus an additional layer of "checks and balances."

The Agency could be an intergovernmental organization with a parliamentarian and civil society components. It could be composed of an Assembly, a Council, a Forum and a Secretariat. All Member States (MS) would participate in the Assembly. The largest MS demographically, and unions of States that represent a large enough share of the Agency's population, such as the EU, could have a permanent seat at the Council. The Assembly and the Council would be the governing bodies of the Agency, as agreed by MS in the Agency's statutes. Representatives of Parliaments and civil society could participate in the deliberations of the Forum, which could convene joint or separate meetings. National DCCs would elect their representatives in the Forum. The Forum would be the main advisory body of the Assembly and the Council. On certain matters, the proposals of the Forum may be automatically introduced in the agenda of the governing bodies, for relevant decision. The Secretariat should have high technical capacities on digital technologies and AI, and high expertise on democratic governance, to adequately assist the governing bodies and MS on the process of establishment and oversight of PCPs and DCCs.

The Agency could be first developed by the EU and the U.S., in the framework of their bilateral dialogue and cooperation. The EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC) could deliberate on an initial proposal, that could be presented by either side, developed jointly, or commissioned to a joint or independent group of experts. When agreed, the Agency could be created, with the single participation of the U.S., the EU and EU MS at an initial stage. The Agency would start as a transatlantic project, as a bridge to help overcome the digital regulatory rift and

reinforce the transatlantic cooperation on the protection of democracy and the liberal world order.

The EU-U.S. cooperation relationship seems to be the best viable existing setting to create the Agency as the EU and the U.S. combine large populations and the technological and institutional capacities that are required to launch such a project. Working on a common project that would create public options of civic platforms could also contribute to regenerate a transatlantic relationship that has been deeply affected in recent years by several major developments, on the political, economic and regulatory dimensions. There is already a push for both the EU and the U.S. to develop new agencies for AI, in the understanding that the current institutional settings are an inadequate response to the challenges of AI. If created, an EU AI Office and a U.S. federal AI agency could find in the IACAID a promising platform for bilateral cooperation.

The AI4D system could revitalize the transatlantic relationship with the common aim of protecting the liberal world order. It would also help establish an additional mechanism of cooperation, complementary to the work of the military alliance. A joint framework of cooperation to enhance the resilience of democracies would be an ideal complement to the role of NATO, and particularly well suited to face Russia's and China's hybrid warfare, particularly in the field of disinformation. There is no reason to keep hard power as the most important track of transatlantic cooperation, as both the EU and the U.S. share a common interest on the protection of democracy and the liberal world order, and this is better done if cooperation is also developed and institutionalized on the soft dimension of power.

Once established, other OECD countries could also be invited to participate in the Agency. It may only be feasible to create the AI4D system amongst a reduced set of stakeholders, and the U.S.-EU relationship seems the best venue for this to happen. Established democracies within the OECD framework, though, could also be invited to participate in the AI4D system, which should ultimately be conceived as a platform to facilitate the international cooperation of democracies on the digital and AI fields (or, in other words, a process to reinforce the "democratic core" within the liberal world order). The OECD already has a developed framework of cooperation on AI, which includes a Policy Observatory and a set of AI principles. Its principle 2.5 concerns "international cooperation

for trustworthy AI", which amongst other principles states that "Governments, including developing countries and with stakeholders, should actively cooperate to advance these principles and to progress on responsible stewardship of trustworthy AI." 456 Its principle 2.3 concerns the "shaping of an enabling policy environment for AI," and states that "Governments should review and adapt, as appropriate, their policy and regulatory frameworks and assessment mechanisms as they apply to AI systems to encourage innovation and competition for trustworthy AI."

The mechanisms of cooperation provided by the AI4D framework would fit the principles and policy guidelines of the OECD. OECD countries are already cooperating along ambitious lines on AI, so opening up the IACAID to their participation would be a logical next step. Membership in the OECD should not limit the possible participation in the AI4D framework, though. All democracies worldwide should be able to present their candidatures of accession. The Agency would examine the democratic merits of candidate countries, and particularly their respect to human rights and the rights and freedoms of civil society. DCCs being at the center of the AI4D system, the Agency would only be enabled to allow the full membership of well-functioning democracies.

#### Opening up the IACAID to countries transitioning to democracy

The AI4D system can also be conceived as a useful tool to attract countries worldwide, and particularly in the Global South, to a balanced and open multistakeholder approach to AI and digital democratic governance. Countries transitioning to democracy should be encouraged to participate as Observers in the Agency, and to prepare themselves for a possible future accession. While China, Russia and other autocracies can be expected to increasingly sponsor digital and AI governance systems designed to dramatically expand the surveillance and population control capacities of States, further fracturing the Internet into national splinternets, advanced democracies must counter their influence with a proposal conceived as a way to protect and promote democracy in the digital realm.

At the geopolitical level, the cycle of great power competition has two dimensions, hard and soft. The most visible part of the global maelstrom, the outer edge of the whirl, is a manifestation of traditional power politics (hard power). Military, economic and technological advantages, including the control of microchip

production and the race for more powerful AI, are at play here. The U.S. is deploying large efforts to stay ahead in the new Cold War with China and Russia. The less visible part, the inner edge of the whirl, is a manifestation of the also traditional, but less acknowledged, ideological dimension of great power competition (soft power). The battle between democracy and autocracy operates at this level. Political and social resilience, and the capacity to subtly attract other countries to democracies' values and processes -with no coercion-, are at play here. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Internet, digital technologies and AI will be the main ideological battlefields of the contest between democracies and autocracies. Countries in the Global South must be attracted to the democratic proposal.

So far, neither the U.S. nor the EU are investing enough on revitalizing their public spheres or the soft power of democracy. As a result, populations worldwide do not perceive liberal democracy to be the solution to most of their problems as strongly as in the past. Democracy as a philosophy and ideal still exerts a strong magnetic pull, derived from its ethics and values, but existing advanced democracies, drained by inequalities, political polarization and governance gridlock and dysfunctions, are not always perceived as models to follow. Many countries in the Global South are looking towards the Chinese governance model, or other autocratic solutions. <sup>457</sup> Even a large sector of voters in the West itself are placing their hopes in illiberal and authoritarian solutions.

The AI4D process would address this problem. By developing PCPs, advanced democracies would counter the critique that they are conferring too much power to markets and established industries to solve societies' problems. The notion of public service would be enhanced, to serve democracy's needs. Placing civil society at the center of democracies' model of digital democratic governance would also show that, unlike autocracies, democracies trust the people, and work with the people and for the people. The AI4D system could help repair the lighthouse of democracy, restoring its magnetic soft power, internally and globally.

Countries transitioning to democracy could be invited to participate as Observers, to learn how the model works. Special partnerships could be developed between the Agency and Observer States, with future membership in sight. These partnerships should include mechanisms of international assistance to help these countries advance in their paths of democratic reform. The AI4D system could be modeled in a similar way as the EU accession process, which has succeeded

in attracting most European countries towards EU integration. The EU has a limited geographic scope and covers all dimensions of national sovereignty. The IACAID would have a global geographic scope, limited to the digital public sphere dimension of democratic governance. As a global club of democracies, it should set adequate mechanisms of cooperation and dialogue with non-democratic countries.

#### Development of partnerships with other countries

The Agency could consider different mechanisms of dialogue and cooperation with non-democratic countries, and other countries that are not interested to join the AI4D system. The Agency would, first of all, facilitate that democracies speak with a single or coherent view on other international fora that deal with Internet, digital and AI governance, and the UN system in particular, if they so decide. Discussions on these matters take place within the UNGA itself and the ITU. The AI4D system would contribute to reinforce dialogue in the UN bodies, revitalizing the democratic narrative, but establishing possible avenues of understanding and cooperation with non-democratic countries.

The establishment of a public service of public civic platforms could be an area of future potential understanding, as democracies would open their multistakeholder approach of Internet governance to a new balance, with larger state involvement and less dependent on western tech industries. This state-rebalancing, though, would indeed be a democratic rebalancing, as the AI4D model would be centered around the role of civil society within DCCs. These outreach efforts could be fruitful in the mid and long-term, once the benefits of increased democratic resilience are evident. In opening up avenues of dialogue with non-democratic countries, democracies would be facilitating a blueprint on how countries can manage their digital public spheres in a democratic manner, fully respectful of all human rights. Ultimately, this could create a new track of dialogue between democracies and authoritarian governments such as the one that took place during the détente, and that resulted in the creation of the CSCE.

The détente during the Cold War provides an example of how a broad perspective on security, that included human rights, could become an adequate platform for dialogue and cooperation amongst opposing ideological blocs. In the new Cold War, it will be essential to establish a mechanism for democracies and autocracies to reduce tensions and discuss on matters of common interest, in a way that should

encompass human rights. The AI4D system could provide a platform for this to happen in the strategic fields of Internet, digital and AI governance, which will be the main ideological battlefields of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It could contribute to ensure that the concept of security remains "indivisible" in the decades ahead, and hence focused on the soft dimension of power as much as on the hard. But democratic resilience should be enhanced for such a process to be possible.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has made the argument that distrust between democracies and autocracies when power competition is at stake is consubstantial to their relationship. The confrontation between democracy and autocracy is a central element of the new Cold War that is taking shape between Russia, China and the U.S. and its allies. This is because soft power matters as much as hard power, and the re-emerging ideological confrontation between democracy and autocracy has energized the geopolitical cycle of distrust, which is also fueled by great power competition.

The democracy vs autocracy paradigm implies that geopolitical dynamics are strongly correlated with domestic politics. This is the case for democratic and for autocratic regimes. Domestic developments, in Ukraine, Russia, the West, Taiwan, China, Japan, the RoK, India, etc, are at the center of the geopolitical cycle of distrust, as foreign policy decisions are shaped by domestic politics. Autocracies face indeed important challenges to their stability. Economic and demographic, amongst many others, in China's case. Social, political, demographic, military and economic, amongst many others, in Russia's case. These challenges, however, do not imply that these countries should be expected to act less assertively in the international sphere, but rather the opposite. Bearing in mind this fact and given the centrality of the U.S. and European countries to the protection of the liberal world order, this paper has considered of particular importance to analyze the structural situation of their domestic politics (especially in the U.S., as the main power and primal anchor of the world order). If a renewed power competition is taking place between democracies and autocracies, what are the perspectives of democratic resilience?

Special attention has been devoted to the problem of democratic backsliding, particularly the challenges of rising polarization and illiberalism. The authoritarian challenge to democracy is not only international, but also domestic. Both levels are intertwined. The impact of mass-media, social media and AI on the erosion and fragmentation of the public sphere of democracies has been described as the central and most urgent challenge that democracies have to face in order to recover citizen's trust in democracy and hence restore a better democratic governance. The reason is that the public sphere constitutes the "central nervous system" of democracy and its erosion and fragmentation has resulted in the

activation of strong cycles of political, social and electoral distrust within democracies, epitomized by the 2021 attack against the U.S. Capitol. Russia and China perceive these developments as democratic vulnerabilities and, as a result, have engaged in actions of "hybrid warfare" against western democracies and are targeting and aiming to hack their "central nervous systems."

Furthermore, the dynamics of distrust within democracies, coupled with China's rise, has triggered expectations on the side of Moscow and Beijing that the liberal world order can be challenged and ultimately changed. Their ambition is the development of a world order more adapted to their autocratic nature, hence devoid of human rights or democratic protections. Ultimately, the domestic cycles of distrust within democracies, particularly in the U.S., have been synchronized with the geopolitical cycle of distrust, as China and Russia are betting that they can change the liberal world order in the midst of democracies' vulnerabilities, which they are exploiting. This synchronization has resulted in the creation of a global maelstrom of distrust, where geopolitical decisions and domestic developments are intertwined and feeding each other in a dangerous spiral that can wreak democracy and the liberal world order.

In face of this global challenge, this paper has developed a policy proposal aimed at restoring trust in democracy at the domestic and the international levels. Its objective is to provide an insight into how to revive the "lighthouse of democracy:" the appeal of democracy, domestically or globally, is ultimately based on a well-functioning public sphere. The policy proposal has provided an idealized framework for a well-functioning digital public sphere that can better work for democracy and the liberal world order.

Domestically, the proposal has recommended the development by democracies of public civic platforms to enable citizen's deliberations online on matters of public interest. It has argued that these platforms, or PCPs, should be run by partnerships of CSOs, academia and citizens chosen by sortition, that could form digital civic communities (or DCCs). With the assistance of public options of AI, the mission of these DCCs would be to ensure the provision of reliable information to citizens and facilitate constructive deliberations to shape public opinion and further understanding across the ideological spectrum. The proposal's theory of change is based on the consideration that substantial democratic reforms in polarized societies require a prior exercise of rehabilitation of the functionality of the digital

public sphere, which cannot be achieved through the existing for-profit social media ecosystem, given its externalities. In other words, to regenerate democracy's central nervous system, and re-activate the lighthouse of democracy, the civic mobilization of citizen's efforts towards a common purpose will be required.

As a result of the current geopolitical context of competition between autocracies and democracies, the proposal has argued that the development of PCPs could be instrumental to build-up the resilience and soft power of the latter. It has recommended that the U.S. and the EU lead the process of creation of an international network of PCPs between democracies, which would act as a web of "safe havens" for democratic life, including the protection of human rights, in the digital public sphere, free from disinformation, deep fakes, virality and hate speech. The process could be named "AI for Democracy" (AI4D) and would be structured around a new International Agency For Cooperation On AI For Democracy (IACAID).

Countries transitioning to democracy could participate as Observers, and the system should establish ways of dialogue and cooperation with non-democratic countries on AI and digital technologies. These outreach efforts could be fruitful in the mid and long-term, once the benefits of increased democratic resilience are evident. In opening up ways of cooperation with countries transitioning to democracy and avenues of dialogue with non-democratic countries, democracies would be facilitating a blueprint on how countries can manage their digital public spheres in a democratic manner, fully respectful of all human rights.

These recommendations have sketched an ambitious architecture of digital platforms that, combining technology and human cooperation, could help restore civic dialogue and political and social trust. They should be understood as a "draft proposal" that, together with other ideas, proposals, and innovations, could be useful for the vibrant ongoing discussion on how to make digital technologies reinforce democracy, rather than undermine it. Its central argument is based on the following understanding: truthful information and civic dialogue are essential public goods for democracy, everywhere, and their provision requires strong and reliable public services. Ultimately, the paper considers that the journey of developing a strong public service for the digital public sphere of democracies is worth the effort, as the potential benefits far outweigh the potential costs, and the risks of inaction are way more concerning.

Autocracies are not the only or single challenge for democratic rule worldwide. Autocracy also emerges from within democracies, when democratic institutions fail to provide the services and, above all, the trust, that democratic governance requires. The fast development of AI can contribute to further energize the global maelstrom of distrust, if it further erodes and fragments the public spheres of democracies. However, technology also represents an opportunity. Democracies can seize it, by applying the best techniques of human control, democratic governance and civic deliberation to AI, and then by using democratically controlled AI as a lever to scale-up a better, more open and more inclusive democratic governance.

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- Note of the author: Metaphorical writing is often used to represent abstract concepts or processes. Metaphorical expressions are communication tools in the hands of politicians, civil servants or academics. They can be useful instruments of public diplomacy and political communication. Examples of their use in international or domestic politics would be terms such as 'cold war', 'soft' power, 'shining city on a hill', 'rogue States', 'invisible hand', 'public sphere', etc. There is something innately human in the use of symbolic language and the construction of metaphors. However, generative AI can already replicate human language and, in doing so, it can mimic humanity itself. When I started working on this paper, in October 2022, I did not expect that GPT would dissolve the human-machine communication borders so soon. This paper has been written without any assistance of any AI tool but has benefitted from the assistance and collaboration of the humans that I mention in the section of acknowledgments.
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- For this paper, the political concept of the 'West' is equivalent to NATO countries. The concept of the West is broader than the strict politico-military commitments of NATO. Substantially, it also includes political and economic coordination among NATO countries. On many political and economic matters, the most relevant western actors are the U.S. and the EU, together with the rest of non-EU NATO members. There are certainly nuances on positions and outliers within NATO, particularly Turkey and Hungary. Ankara and Budapest strive to keep closer relations with Moscow. With these caveats, the paper will alternatively use the terms 'West', western countries or powers, NATO, allies, the U.S. and the EU, and signal out relevant nuances when necessary. Geographically, the West is arguably wider than Europe and North America. On broader, richer, conceptions of the West, that would also include Latin America, the following article provides a clear insight: Ramos Membrive, A.L. (2018). George Kennan and the Hispanic-Lusitanian world. Global Square Magazine. https://www.globalsquaremagazine.com/2018/10/16/george-kennan-and-the-hispanic-lusitanian-world/
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- Neorealist doctrines often overlook the ideological dimension of conflicts, which does not fit properly in a worldview focused on the raw pursuit of power. This paper considers, though, that ideology is central to international relations. Constructivist and liberal doctrines take it well into account. Constructivism, for instance, focuses on the impact of shared ideas (knowledge) in international relationships. Alexander Wendt points out that "the structures of human association (including national interests) are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces Wendt, A. (1992). 'Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics'. *International Organization*, 2, 391-425 and Wendt, A. (1999). 'Social Theory of International Politics', First Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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  - When people mistrust government, they will resent government more and support and obey it less. They will also refuse to believe important governmental messages. They will see those messages as lies or as based on a desire to control the populace. Those who support the government, by contrast, will act more cooperatively. This will create cleavages between different political groups. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has made failures of political trust palpable and tragic." Kevin Vallier. Vallier, K. (2022). Political Trust. BYU Law Review. <a href="https://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3372&context=lawreview">https://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3372&context=lawreview</a>
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  - The notion of complex cloud problems becoming attractors and forming coherent patterns that draw us in partly inspired the use in this paper of the metaphor of the 'maelstrom' (term which Peter T. Coleman also employs).
- 192 Coleman, P.T. (2021). The way out. How to overcome toxic polarization. Columbia University Press
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- 194 The first "I" period took place after industrialization had left its footprint in a society that, decades before, had been described by Tocqueville as remarkably egalitarian.
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- 196 *Ibia*
- 197 A note on "individualism" and "comity" or "community": this paper aims to follow Tocqueville's conception concerning individualism (a term he coined). As explained by Professor Putnam, Tocqueville, "keenly aware of the dangers of individualism, was inspired by what he saw in America: its citizens were profoundly protective of their

independence, but through associating widely and deeply, they were able to overcome selfish desires, engage in collective problem solving, and work together to build a vibrant and -by comparison to Europe at that time-surprisingly egalitarian society by what he called 'self-interest, rightly understood". Putnam, R. D., Garrett, S. R. (2020). The upswing: how America came together a century ago and how we can do it again (First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition.). Simon & Schuster. Hence, individualism in this paper is not represented as a development that aspires to better protect individual freedoms and human rights, but rather as a tendency to raise the individual against the community, and in opposition to it, as is often the case with libertarian doctrines. Furthermore, this paper is based on the consideration that the protection of the rights and freedoms of all individuals requires an egalitarian approach towards all of them. Therefore, in a highly individualistic society, a communitarian re-balancing is necessary to better protect the individual rights and freedoms of all citizens. Individual and community need to find an Aristotelian balance and engage in a dialogue to find themselves. Too much individualism, in detriment of community, damages the community and individuals. Too much communitarianism, in detriment of individuality, damages individuals and the community.

- 198 It is only logical, as democracy, comity, cooperation and civic dialogue are synonyms. 'The government of the People, for the People and by the People', even in the shape of a representative democracy, can only be a community that cooperates through a civic dialogue. Absent the elements of civic dialogue, cooperation, and community, democracy ceases to exist and representative democracy cannot work.
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  - Habermas discerns the extrication of a public social sphere that operated between private autonomy and state authority. Stanley, T. (2015). *Utopia and the Public sphere. Philarchive*. <a href="https://philarchive.org/archive/STAUAT">https://philarchive.org/archive/STAUAT</a>
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- It is worth noting that anthropologists Graeber and Wengrow, in "the Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity", critique the traditional narratives of history's linear development from primitivism to civilization. Instead, *The Dawn of Everything* posits that humans have lived in large, complex, but decentralized polities for millennia. It relies on archaeological evidence to show that early societies were diverse and developed numerous political structures. These often included different forms of collective deliberation or, so to say, 'public spheres'.
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Habermas conceived the public sphere as an arena of discourse that took shape in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It brought about the Enlightenment, and ultimately modern liberal democracy. "With the rise of mercantilist classes at this time, a new social sphere began to emerge that existed between official and private interactions — fostering a culture of public discussion that had never been previously seen. These interactions took place between regular citizens in public spaces such as cafes, public squares, and salons, and were an opportunity for citizens to discuss intellectual matters. The new forum of interaction that the public sphere represented, and the increased engagement that resulted, allowed for a small yet significant rebalance of power amongst bourgeois citizens and the traditional authorities of church and state." Marston, B. (2020). Dissecting the Utopia and realities of the digital public sphere. SearchMedium. <a href="https://brookemarston.medium.com/dissecting-the-utopia-and-realities-of-the-digital-public-sphere-f1f2aaffle5b">https://brookemarston.medium.com/dissecting-the-utopia-and-realities-of-the-digital-public-sphere-f1f2aaffle5b</a>

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- 223 Butsch, R. (2007). Media and Public Spheres (1st ed. 2007.). Palgrave Macmillan UK: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan
- 224 Ortega y Gasset, J. (1932). The revolt of the masses: authorized translation from the Spanish. W. W. Norton & company, inc.
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- 236 Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2021). Digital technology and democratic theory. The University of Chicago Press.

- 237 The 'narrow aperture' acted as a constraint, but also allowed the application of the norms and standards of professional journalism. As argued by Archon Fung and Joshua Cohen: "the shared sensibilities of journalists and editors, as well as professional norms, all narrowed the aperture of information and explanations that reached mass audiences". Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2021). Digital technology and democratic theory. The University of Chicago Press.
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  The publication of 'the Pentagon Papers by the New York Times, revealing the secret official story of the Vietnam war, or, more recently, the exposure of Trump's lies and scandals throughout his Presidency, would be other clear examples of an independent press acting as 'watchdog of democracy'. There can be no liberal democracy without a free and independent press.
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- 271 TV celebrities turned politicians have been particularly able to push or redefine these limits, as in the case of Italy's Silvio Berlusconi or America's Trump.
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- 363 Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2021). Digital technology and democratic theory. The University of Chicago Press. The Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy. (2019). Crisis in Democracy: Renewing Trust in America. Knight Foundation. <a href="https://knightfoundation.org/reports/crisis-in-democracy-renewing-trust-in-america/">https://knightfoundation.org/reports/crisis-in-democracy-renewing-trust-in-america/</a>
- 364 UNESCO (2023). Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. <a href="https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics">https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics</a>
- Future of Life Institute (2023). Pause Giant AI Experiments: An Open Letter Future of Life Institute. <a href="https://futureoflife.org/open-letter/pause-giant-ai-experiments/">https://futureoflife.org/open-letter/pause-giant-ai-experiments/</a>
- 366 Tufekci, Zeynup (17 February 2010). The corporation of social commons. https://technosociology.org/?p=102
- 367 Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2021). Digital technology and democratic theory. The University of Chicago Press.
- 368 Ovayda, A. (2021). Towards platform democracy: policymaking beyond corporate CEOs and partisan pressure. Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Harvard Kennedy School. <a href="https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/towards-platform-democracy-policymaking-beyond-corporate-ceos-and-partisan-pressure">https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/towards-platform-democracy-policymaking-beyond-corporate-ceos-and-partisan-pressure</a>
- 369 Ibid.
- 370 Ibid.
- 371 Ibid.
- 372 Pariser, E. (2022). Musk's Twitter Will Not Be the Town Square the World Needs. Wired. https://www.wired.com/story/elon-musk-twitter-town-square/

- 373 It gained a lot of international media attention on the occasion of a petition urging the U.S. government to create a 'Death Star' as an economic stimulus (this does not seem to be the reason for the webpage no longer being active). https://elpais.com/elpais/2013/01/12/gente/1357980653 284794.html
- 374 Schneier, B., Farrell, H., and Sanders, N.E. (2023). How Artificial Intelligence Can Aid Democracy. Slate. <a href="https://slate.com/technology/2023/04/ai-public-option.html">https://slate.com/technology/2023/04/ai-public-option.html</a>
- 375 Pethokoukis, J. (2018). 'Why we should have a public option version of Google and Facebook'. AEI. Available at: <a href="https://www.aei.org/economics/why-we-should-have-a-public-option-version-of-google-and-facebook/">https://www.aei.org/economics/why-we-should-have-a-public-option-version-of-google-and-facebook/</a>
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- 376 McConnell, M.W. (2023). 'Why are government social media takedown secret? Make them public'. The Washington Post. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/07/government-social-media-takedown-requests-public/
- 377 NASA's success in bringing humankind to the moon being a case in point. The political organization of modern liberal democracies itself is a much larger prowess than engineering a digital platform.
- 378 Meta has recently been fined by the Irish Data Protection Commission with a record 1,2 billion euro fine for not complying with the EU GDPR. This means that its practices in violation of EU citizens privacy rights have continued despite the existence of a regulatory framework. TikTok is suspected to be or potentially become a tool of digital surveillance of the PRC, and there is an ongoing debate on the appropriate response by the US. The US has banned the use of TikTok by some federal employees and the EU has done the same across its three main institutions (Commission, Council and Parliament). Montana has banned TikTok last May, and TikTok has sued back, arguing that the ban is unconstitutional. The protections granted by the First Amendment of the US Constitution may complicate this or wider bans.
- 379 Most information nowadays flows through the Internet, which is as useful as it is chaotic. Gatekeepers find their added value in organizing information and activities in single platforms or points of entry. Most citizens browse to the fastest and most credited search engines, the largest e-commerce platforms, and the largest and most interactive social media, for their daily activities in the web. This reality is why some successful tech companies have evolved into Big Tech. They have become massive digital hubs. One service of Big Tech, though, has proven to be especially problematic. This is the case of social media. Governments can facilitate the creation of large-scale civic digital hubs.
- 380 Tufekci, Zeynup (17 February 2010). The corporation of social commons. <a href="https://technosociology.org/?p=102">https://technosociology.org/?p=102</a>. Coyle, D. (2018). We need a publicly funded rival to Facebook and Google. FT. <a href="https://www.ft.com/content/d56744a0-835c-11e8-9199-c2a4754b5a0e">https://www.ft.com/content/d56744a0-835c-11e8-9199-c2a4754b5a0e</a>
- 381 Few countries have the capacities necessary to build such digital platforms within their own bureaucracies or agencies. Administrations, though, could outsource the technological development of the platforms to foundations or non-profits through public tenders. Given the economies of scale that operate in digital platforms, in many cases these could better work at supra-national level. The U.S., for instance, would find little problem to develop its own PCPs, given its size, capacities and resources. In Europe, though, the exercise might be better coordinated at EU level. The procurement and development of PCPs would most likely be the smallest challenge. Absent an ad revenue and an attention-extraction system, the software of a digital platform should be simpler than the market models. The main objectives would be to ensure an adequate user experience and all required cybersecurity protocols, particularly with regards to the ID verification systems.
- 382 Patberg, M. (2023). Digital transformation. Habermas and the new structural transformation of the public sphere. RevDem. <a href="https://revdem.ceu.edu/2023/02/02/digital-fragmentation-habermas-on-the-new-structural-transformation-of-the-public-sphere/">https://revdem.ceu.edu/2023/02/02/digital-fragmentation-habermas-on-the-new-structural-transformation-of-the-public-sphere/</a>
- 383 Cui, W. (2018). The Digital Services Tax: A conceptual defense. University of British Columbia. SSRN. <a href="https://papers.srn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\_id=3273641">https://papers.srn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\_id=3273641</a>
  Coyle, D. (2018). We need a publicly funded rival to Facebook and Google. FT. <a href="https://www.ft.com/content/d56744a0-835c-1le8-9199-c2a4754b5a0e">https://www.ft.com/content/d56744a0-835c-1le8-9199-c2a4754b5a0e</a>
  Milne, C. (2020). <a href="https://pablic.option.social.media.Medium.https://medium.com/@milne\_christopher/public-option-social-media-d14b5433b579">https://medium.com/@milne\_christopher/public-option-social-media-d14b5433b579</a>
- 384 This could happen, first at local level.
- 385 The DCCs to be constituted would proactively develop the role of broadcasters, community organizers, institutions and mediators within PCPs. DCCs would bring in the institutional and human dimension at scale (The role of DCCs will be further analyzed in the next chapter).
- 386 The EU is already working on a European Digital Identity. <a href="https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-digital-identity\_en">https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/european-digital-identity\_en</a>
- 387 Legal provisions and democratic and judicial oversight would cement trust on the model.

  This would make PCPs safer and less prone to hacking than other digital media, as they would have a relatively small amount of data to protect. It would also make them much more economic than mainstream digital platforms, as the bulk of the engineering and operations of Big Tech social media is focused on the attention-extraction system and revenue model. Public services depend on adequate government funding, not on attracting citizens' attention, and PCPs would essentially be a public service. As happens with other services, the public option can be more economic. As mentioned, it could be funded by taxes or by digital service taxes (DSTs) imposed on large for-profit platforms.

- Petri, A. (2023). 'Not another social media network!'. The Washington Post. <a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/12/twitter-threads-social-media-nightmare-apocalypse-satire/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/12/twitter-threads-social-media-nightmare-apocalypse-satire/</a>
- 389 If this redirection was established, citizens would have two ways to access PCPs: either directly, or as a result of a redirection from social media platforms.
- 390 From the perspective of social media, PCPs would work as 'bad banks' of problematic or sensitive political information and discussions, which they cannot effectively manage.
  The application of open, decentralized, social networking protocols, such as ActivityPub, could facilitate this.
- 391 Venkataraman, B. (2023). A better kind of social media is possible if we want it. The Washington Post. <a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/06/social-media-future-regulation-imagination/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/06/social-media-future-regulation-imagination/</a>
- 392 DeJohn, S. (2017). Beyond Protest: Examining the Decide Madrid Platform for Public Engagement. TheGovLab. https://blog.thegovlab.org/post/beyond-protest-examining-the-decide-madrid-platform-for-public-engagement
- 393 Centre for Public Impact (2016). Building world-beating e-government in South Korea. <a href="https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/case-study/building-a-world-leading-e-government">https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/case-study/building-a-world-leading-e-government</a>
- 394 Courant, D. (2021). Citizens' Assemblies for Referendums and Constitutional Reforms: Is There an "Irish Model" for Deliberative Democracy? Frontiers in Political Science, 2. <a href="https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2020.591983">https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2020.591983</a>
- 395 Participedia: EuroPolis: Deliberative Polling on the EU. https://participedia.net/case/4136
- 396 EuroPolis. A deliberative polity-making project. https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/225314/fr
- 397 Fishkin, J.S., Luskin, R.C., Siu, A. Europolis and the European Public sphere: empirical explorations of a counterfactual ideal. EUP. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DmQBl2yTKiONaRiIDOEsGPMNzJCi-xGT/view?pli=1
- 398 Wolf, M., & ProQuest. (2023). The crisis of democratic capitalism. Penguin Press.
- 399 The Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy. (2019). Crisis in Democracy: Renewing Trust in America. Knight Foundation. https://knightfoundation.org/reports/crisis-in-democracy-renewing-trust-in-america/
- 400 CNN (2023). "We do not know how to control these things" Geoffrey Hinton, often called the 'godfather' of Artificial Intelligence, is now warning about its..." Facebook. <a href="https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=573499221277846">https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=573499221277846</a>
- 401 As has been repeatedly stated, the technology is not the problem, its governance is. Ensuring an adequate democratic governance is the key problem to solve.
- 402 Aside from trust, a central issue would be to achieve citizen's involvement. The zeitgeist of the 2020's may not be anymore to 'move fast and break things', but citizen's mental frameworks are still often attached to short, fast bits of entertainment and polarizing emotions. Therein lies to a big extent the success of TikTok. Moving towards a system that aims to 'move slow and build trust' will be a daunting endeavor. It could be possible, if PCPs, aside from providing civic functionality, also do so in an easy, accessible, pedagogic way. PCPs cannot and should not compete with social media on 'entertainment', but engagement in these platforms needs to be extremely accessible.
- 403 Venkataraman, B. (2023). A better kind of social media is possible if we want it. The Washington Post. <a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/06/social-media-future-regulation-imagination/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/06/social-media-future-regulation-imagination/</a>
- 404 The social media ownership -and often their CEOs- are the basic gatekeepers of social platforms. CEOs have the latest word in organizing the inner governance of the platforms, deciding the format of publishing by users, establishing certain limits and -eventually- enforcing them, in the knowledge that they face -in the US and most of the world- little to zero accountability, as they are protected by Section 230 of the US Telecommunications Act. The inner governance structure of social media is too loose and ineffective.
- 405 McConnell, M.W. (2023). Why are government social media takedown secret? Make them public. The Washington Post. <a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/07/government-social-media-takedown-requests-public/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/07/government-social-media-takedown-requests-public/</a> Urban, D. (2022). Government-hosted social media-how to avoid First Amendment claims. LCW. <a href="https://www.lcwlegal.com/news/government-hosted-social-media-how-to-avoid-first-amendment-claims/">https://www.lcwlegal.com/news/government-hosted-social-media-how-to-avoid-first-amendment-claims/</a> Considerations on the First Amendment have historically affected most debates on media regulation in the U.S. The committee that 'redefined freedom of the press' and produced the 1947 Hutchins report had it in mind during its deliberations. As explained by Stephen Bates, the committee ended up 'reconceiving' the First Amendment: "they decided that, properly interpreted, 'Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech' sometimes means 'Congress shall make law enhancing the freedom of speech''. Bates, S. (2020). An aristocracy of critics. Luce, Hutchins, Niebhur, and the committee that redefined freedom of the press. Yale University Press.
- 406 Ibia
- 407 Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2023). Democratic responsibility in the digital public sphere. Constellations (Oxford, England), 30(1). 92–97. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12670
- 408 Only well-regulated, independent public broadcasters, that comply with the standards adopted by the IACAID, could fulfil this role. Public broadcasters of backsliding democracies or anocracies would most likely not qualify.
- Major media outlets can provide news but, to remain profitable in a very competitive market, such as cable TV, they cannot avoid caring about ratings. This means that private media corporations need the news to be either entertaining or -in the worst cases- tailored to the political preferences of their 'customers'. Public broadcasters must not compromise their standards to report effectively, they must just abide by the law, their statutes, and apply the ethical norms and principles of independent journalism.

- 409 "Obtaining reliable information in the digital public sphere may thus require considerable effort to distinguish reliable and instructive information from propaganda, screeds, and bullshit." Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2021). Digital technology and democratic theory. The University of Chicago Press. "The responsibility for vigilance in policing the supply of news is easiest to see for platforms like Apple News that are both formally and functionally in the news business. Formally, because they are in the business of curating content, thus certifying to users that they are concerned with veracity in the sources they provide access to. Functionally, because they drive very substantial traffic to professional journalism." Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2021). Digital technology and democratic theory. The University of Chicago Press. Informative DCCs would assume the responsibility of vigilance within PCPs.
- 410 Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2021). Digital technology and democratic theory. The University of Chicago Press.
- 411 Ibid.
- 412 The 1947 Hutchins report could be a model for the U.S. Information on the Hutchins committee and report can be found in: Bates, S. (2020). An aristocracy of critics. Luce, Hutchins, Niebhur, and the committee that redefined freedom of the press. Yale University Press. "The responsibility for vigilance in policing the supply of news is easiest to see for platforms like Apple News that are both formally and functionally in the news business. Formally, because they are in the business of curating content, thus certifying to users that they are concerned with veracity in the sources they provide access to. Functionally, because they drive very substantial traffic to professional journalism." Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2021). Digital technology and democratic theory. The University of Chicago Press. Informative DCCs would assume the responsibility of vigilance within PCPs.
- 413 Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2021). Digital technology and democratic theory. The University of Chicago Press.
- 414 If partnerships under the guidance of public broadcasters could not ensure an adequate structure of inner coordination within DCCs, participating media could agree on alternative mechanisms, such as rotational chairpersonships or lotteries.
- 415 The Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy. (2019). Crisis in Democracy: Renewing Trust in America. Knight Foundation. <a href="https://knightfoundation.org/reports/crisis-in-democracy-renewing-trust-in-america/">https://knightfoundation.org/reports/crisis-in-democracy-renewing-trust-in-america/</a>
- 416 Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2021). Digital technology and democratic theory. The University of Chicago Press.
- 417 Collaboration between competing media outlets could seem unworkable, but this model aims to provide a system of incentives that could make it possible within PCPs: a public financing contribution to journalism that complies with well-accepted norms and standards. Media outlets would still compete amongst each other 'out in the market', but they could find incentives to develop a measure of collaboration within PCPs: the public service perspective should enable this cooperation.
- 418 It can be questioned whether it is necessary to make any efforts to mobilize media, journalists and academia to establish a complex system to ensure the provision of trustworthy information to society within digital safe havens, when the development of generative tools such as GPT4 -and future systems to come- might soon make these human organizations and processes obsolete. Why, rely on the human and fallible job of journalism, when Al systems can provide us all the information we need, instantly? If the absolutely essential role of informing a society is fully outsourced to Al systems -and those who own them and control them-, what is to be expected of humanity's empowerment and freedom? The issue is philosophically profound, but it must be emphasized that an essential component of democratic rule is ensuring an equal distribution of political power amongst citizens. The usurpation of citizen's power by foreign regimes, single parties, economic monopolies, or machines, is intolerable for democracies. Keeping human control of information and Al is absolutely essential, and it is necessary to maintain and support the institution of human independent journalism, which for centuries has allowed democracy to grow and flourish, even if it has a financial cost. The alternative, which might mean the disappearance of independent journalism as we know it, might make short-term financial sense, but the economic, social, cultural and human costs would be unbearable.
- 419 Many countries have Associations or Coordinating Platforms of CSOs. One example of such organizations is "Coordinadora de ONGDs", a platform to coordinate NGOs focused on development in Spain. La Coordinadora de Organizaciones Para el Desarrollo (2023). Qué hacemos. https://coordinadoraongd.org/nuestro-trabajo/
- 420 As with media, collaboration between a broad spectrum of often competing CSOs, unions, cooperatives, charities, etc, can seem challenging. However, as was explained, this model aims to provide a system of incentives that could make it possible within PCPs: a public financing contribution to communities that facilitate civic engagement could be considered (numerous CSOs already receive public funds, given the social and ecological value of their work). Aside from this, for many organizations, an access to a large public platform and the visibility it could provide would already represent an incentive, together with the possibility of promoting coalitions and alliances to further their civic goals. The public service perspective should enable this cooperation.
- 421 Sortition was a core practice of Athenian democracy. The institution of the jury brought it into contemporary administration of justice. Tocqueville mentioned the importance of the jury as a way for people to act as responsible citizens in his study of American democracy.
- 422 In the same way as track 1 DCCs, track 2 DCCs would organize themselves internally with great autonomy, with the only limitation of having to abide by the general framework of governance and code of conduct approved by the IACAID and the laws and rules applicable in the different countries. PCPs, with the assistance of their LLMs, could help Deliberative DCCs organize their own structure of internal deliberation and decision making. DCCs could form their own platforms for internal coordination within PCPs -possible through DAOs-, choosing the model of governance that would suit them best.

- 423 Hawken, P. (2007). Blessed unrest: how the largest movement in the world came into being and why no one saw it coming. Viking.
- 424 Earth Day, for instance, would not mobilize millions of citizens worldwide every year if it was not for the impulse provided by CSOs and community leaders and organizers. It might have not been a success in the first place, if the year when it started, in 1970, it had not been supported by non-environmentally focused partners, such as the United Auto Workers (UAW).
- 425 Academia and CSOs usually have adequate expertise to organize collective deliberations, yet they may lack the incentives or capacities to do so systematically and at large scale. Gathering citizen's attention and support to better pursue their goals would be one important incentive. Governments, in consultation with CSOs, could consider others. Shortage of capacities can be compensated through adequate training: academia could rely on the work of students and include their participation in DCCs as part of their curriculum. CSOs could rely on the work of volunteers.
- 426 Patberg, M. (2023). Digital transformation. Habermas and the new structural transformation of the public sphere. RevDem. <a href="https://revdem.ceu.edu/2023/02/02/digital-fragmentation-habermas-on-the-new-structural-transformation-of-the-public-sphere/">https://revdem.ceu.edu/2023/02/02/digital-fragmentation-habermas-on-the-new-structural-transformation-of-the-public-sphere/</a>
- 427 If collective deliberations resulted on the adoption of concrete policy proposals, Deliberative DCCs would pass the baton to Facilitating DCCs, established to assist citizens to participate in democratic processes, under 'track 3' of the PCP system. If collective deliberations resulted on disputes or conflicts, Deliberative DCCs would pass the baton to Mediating DCCs, established for dispute setting and conflict resolution, under 'track 4' of the PCP system.
- 428 Schneier, B. (2023). Al could shore up democracy; Here's one way. Schneier on Security. <a href="https://www.schneier.com/essays/archives/2023/06/ai-could-shore-up-democracy-heres-one-way.html">https://www.schneier.com/essays/archives/2023/06/ai-could-shore-up-democracy-heres-one-way.html</a>
- 429 Schneier, B., Farrell, H., and Sanders, N.E. (2023). How Artificial Intelligence Can Aid Democracy. Slate. <a href="https://slate.com/technology/2023/04/ai-public-option.html">https://slate.com/technology/2023/04/ai-public-option.html</a>
  Venkataraman, B. (2023). A better kind of social media is possible if we want it. The Washington Post. <a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/06/social-media-future-regulation-imagination/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/06/social-media-future-regulation-imagination/</a>
- 430 Patberg, M. (2023). Digital transformation. Habermas and the new structural transformation of the public sphere. RevDem. <a href="https://revdem.ceu.edu/2023/02/02/digital-fragmentation-habermas-on-the-new-structural-transformation-of-the-public-sphere/">https://revdem.ceu.edu/2023/02/02/digital-fragmentation-habermas-on-the-new-structural-transformation-of-the-public-sphere/</a>
- 431 Internet companies should help users behave as citizens by designing their platforms to foster participants' democratic orientation. Platforms themselves can take responsibility for enhancing digital literacy by more explicitly recognizing that some sources are negligent about truth, by spreading habits of checking, and by encouraging users to encounter diverse perspectives. But design is not enough; we will also need bottom- up efforts that elicit the right kind of engagement and content generation from users." Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2021). Digital technology and democratic theory. The University of Chicago Press. Deliberative DCCs, assisted by LLMs, would help 'users behave as citizens' by providing guidance and moderation within PCPs.
- 432 "[A] pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit no cure for the mischiefs of faction." Madison. Federalist No. 10.
- 433 The development of track 2 DCCs would not undermine the authority of the bodies of representative democracy. These would retain all their constitutional and legal prerogatives; in the same way they have done since the creation of social media. Deliberative DCCs could inform their institutional deliberations and assist them constructively, in a way that social media cannot do. Democratic representatives could work in a more civic and better-informed environment than they do now, if citizens moved at least a significant part of their digital conversation, the one that concerns matters of common interest, to PCPs.
- 434 Another set of deliberations could refer to the development and regulation of digital technologies, and particularly generative AI and AR/VR systems. Global health and nutrition, poverty, migrations, the protection of biodiversity, etc, could all be systematically debated within PCPs.
- 435 The social media dimension of the January 6th insurrection in the US, or the more recent one in Brazil, should act as reminders. Rather than allowing the risks of this system to continue growing through the development of increasingly powerful AI, democracies could create PCPs and empower their civil societies to recover control of their data, thoughts and conversations.
- 436 The most striking case is the US, where some limitations are being established at the state level. Eg: about 900.000 Floridians with felony convictions remain unable to vote because of unpaid court fines or fees. Mower, L. (2022) "Florida leads nation in voter disenfranchisement, criminal justice group says". Tampa Bay Times. Times Publishing Company.
  - Track 3 DCCs could assist voters that may face difficulties to vote, by keeping them well informed of their rights and the procedures they need to comply with through a reliable channel of communication.
- 437 One of the main exceptions is sometimes the institution of the referendum, which can be problematic in its conception -as there is often only a binary choice presented to the public-, but especially in its application -due to informational distortions and a lack of appropriate deliberation-. The Brexit referendum being a notorious example, but also other major referenda in large EU countries, such as the French referendum on the European Constitution of 2005.

- 438 Tang, A. (2022). What the World Can Learn from Taiwan's Digital Democracy. Wired. <a href="https://www.wired.co.uk/article/global-neighbourhoods-digital-democracy">https://www.wired.co.uk/article/global-neighbourhoods-digital-democracy</a>
- 439 Robbins, S. (2022). Let's Stop Calling Taiwan a Digital Democracy (and Start Telling Better Digital Stories). Taiwan Insight: The online magazine of the Taiwan Studies Programme, University of Nottingham. <a href="https://taiwaninsight.org/2022/05/12/lets-stop-calling-taiwan-a-digital-democracy-and-start-telling-better-digital-stories/">https://taiwaninsight.org/2022/05/12/lets-stop-calling-taiwan-a-digital-democracy-and-start-telling-better-digital-stories/</a>
- 440 This assembly in Ireland was formed by one hundred people, made up of one appointed chairperson and ninetynine ordinary citizens chosen by lot. The reason why this example is mentioned under track 3 DCCs, and not under track 2 DCCs, is that Ireland had the initiative to create this body to advise on an issue and committed itself to study the advice. Under the PCP model, track 2 DCCs are owned by civil society entirely and public institutions may or may not follow the advice. Track 3 DCCs, though, are led by public institutions, which implies a much higher level of commitment to their deliberations and proposals.
- 441 For example minors, citizens with disabilities, crime victims, unemployed, minorities, refugees, migrants, homeless, elders, citizens with health problems, including mental health issues and facing addictions, uneducated or illiterate citizens, etc. Navigating the Internet and accessing the right governments' and institutions' websites and digital tools can often be too complicated and burdensome, particularly for more vulnerable sectors of society.
- 442 Estonia would be a leading example in this field: https://e-estonia.com/
- 443 As a public service, institutional communication could flow directly to citizens through track 3 DCCs, but also with the mediation of public broadcasters and media through track 1 DCCs. PCPs would hence become important instruments to enhance democracies resilience in face of unexpected or extreme challenges.
- 444 The model of the ICRC could be helpful to develop an adequate framework for track 4 DCCs.
- 445 Cohen, J., & Fung, A. (2023). Democratic responsibility in the digital public sphere. Constellations (Oxford, England), 30(1), 92–97. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12670
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- 452 Disputes could involve radicalized individuals. DCCs would need to distinguish situations and organize the process of dialogue as is required. Citizens with extreme views or patterns of behavior could be offered adequate guidance for rehabilitation and social integration. In many cases, undetected cases of mental illness can hide behind. Track 4 processes could help detect such cases, to be able to react accordingly.
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- 454 If created, the IACAID could have a broader mandate than the promotion and oversight of the PCP-DCC process. The AI4D system could facilitate any kind of cooperation on AI and digital technologies between democracies.
- 455 There would certainly be many challenges to face. Amongst others, as was mentioned before, the fact that democratic backsliding has already eroded democracy in two EU Member States: Hungary and Poland. The system, though, could first be gradually implemented within a small group of volunteering countries. It could also include opt-out clauses for those who do not want to participate or who lack the conditions to do so.
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- For instance, as was analyzed in the paper, Putin did not invade Ukraine only or mainly as a response to its future potential accession into NATO, and the hypothetical military threat to Russia that this could suppose, but as a consequence of the ideological threat that a democratic and western-oriented Ukraine would represent for his regime and for Russian nationalism. Ukrainian domestic politics and its willingness to move towards the West, coupled with Russian autocratic nationalism, are at the core of the current war. Conversely, the West is supporting Ukraine to protect European security, democracy, the principles of the UN Charter and the liberal world order. Domestic and geopolitical factors are intertwined.

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