

The Legacy of Democracies and Violation of Democratic Standards

Summary Brief



THE OSLO CENTER
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Introduction

The challenges to democracy worldwide have increased over the last decade, and it has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on civil liberties and electoral processes due to the implementation of exceptional measures. The questions of how we can protect, promote, and build democratic values have become more relevant than ever. On May 27th, 2021, the Oslo Center hosted a webinar to discuss the importance of democratic resilience, the threats encountered, and global cooperation. With a keynote speech delivered by the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Gordon Brown, and the expertise provided by the panel participants, the webinar offered unique and valuable insight on the legacy of democracies and violation of democratic standards.

Global cooperation and where we can make greatest progress

The former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Gordon Brown, outlined two realities at the onset of his speech: In contrast to the predictions of many, the fall of the Berlin Wall did not result in the triumph of the liberal democracy, nor have economic development necessarily brought human rights - democracy is now facing a pushback in Eastern Europe, across the Middle East, in Africa, and Asia. The former Prime Minister bluntly accredited the failure of globalization and global cooperation to the return of an aggressive, almost tribal, *political nationalism*: defensive nationalism such as the construction of walls, increased tariffs, and protectionism, and aggressive nationalism by "my country first" proclamations that guide foreign policy. Nationalist movements, Brown asserted, are exploiting genuine economic insecurities by creating a dangerous "us versus them" nationalism.

Despite this somber reality, Brown's speech contained a message of hope for democracy: if the underlying social

and economic injustices, ignored too much and too long by the world, are addressed, the progress of democratization may continue. Many of the challenges we

Date: 13:00 CET, May 27, 2021

Keynote Speech: "Global cooperation and where we can make greatest progress" by former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, *Gordon Brown*.

Panel discussion: "The backsliding of democracy and the rising of autocracies".

- *Espen Barth Eide*, Member of the Norwegian Parliament
- *Karolina Olofsson*, Senior Advisor at the Oslo Center
- *Henrik Syse*, Senior Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
- *Lisbeth Pilegaard*, Executive Director at the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD)

Moderator: *Christian Borch*

are facing today, be it delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals or COVID-19 vaccine nationalism, shares the characteristic of being *global problems that require global solutions*. According to Brown, "us versus them" nationalism thrives when we fail to cultivate strong communities – peoples' belonging to a city, country, or a continent. Showcasing that globalization can be managed well can restore that feeling of belonging. Brown proclaimed that he does not give up: By focusing on progressing issue by issue, a greener and safer world can be achieved with a balance between *international cooperation* and *national autonomy*.

"We do not just cooperate out of need; we have a human need to cooperate."

Gordon Brown, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom



The backsliding of democracy and the rising of autocracies

In the panel discussion, the themes of democratic culture and representation were key. Norwegian Member of Parliament, Espen Barth Eide, pointed out the need to distinguish between two trends: the rise of authoritarian states and the erosion of democracy from within. While formal democratic institutions are crucial for democratic resilience, Eide emphasized the necessity of a democratic culture to prevent erosion. He argued that the transition of power is dependent not only on the electoral outcome, but also the *understanding* and *willingness* of leaders to ensure the necessary transition. According to Eide, democratic erosion has been precipitated by the deterioration of the sense that we are all in the same boat – the “we”. Similar to Brown, Eide believed that the rapid increase and poor handling of globalization has also been accompanied by an increase in inequality. The disparity between people in society leads to a sense of the social contract eroding – which leaves us vulnerable to “us versus them” ideology.

Karolina Olofsson, Senior Advisor at the Oslo Center, added to Eide’s thoughts on democratic culture and erosion by highlighting the concerning trends in countries such as Brazil, the U.S., India, Poland, Hungary, Belarus, Hong Kong, and Myanmar, where especially freedom of speech, association and information is increasingly under threat. Additionally, due to COVID-19, the integrity of the democratic electoral processes is called into question with the postponement, sometimes indefinite, of elections. Olofsson also highlighted the development of information technology as being a *mobilizing agent* for people – both for positive change, but also for extreme nationalism through the proliferation of disinformation. Additionally, Olofsson emphasized the relationship between *democratic erosion* and *issues of representation* – is the commonality in democratically backsliding countries poor political representation for youth, women, and ethnical minorities? If citizens feel that society’s institutions no longer represent them, the social contract itself is challenged.

Henrik Syse, Senior Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), shared his reflections on the main



From the top left: Karolina Olofsson, Henrik Syse, and Christian Borch. From the middle left: Lisbeth Pilegaard, Espen Barth Eide, and Kjell Magne Bondevik. Bottom: Finn Jarle Rode.

pillars of sustainable democracies and agreed with Olofsson on representation: The experience of not being marginalized and powerless, the *participatory nature of democracy*, is vital to the system’s integrity. Indeed, the success of a democracy is dependent on people trusting the system and the system enforcing that trust, as well as the government being responsive to the people and the existence of a *culture of tolerance* for disagreements. Touching upon what Eide had previously said, Syse also remarked that political leaders need to create a democratic culture from the top by encouraging free speech.

Lisbeth Pilegaard, Executive Director at the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD), added to the previous panelists comments on representation by proclaiming that there is a need to *reset the democratic compass*: citizens must once again believe in the system and feel that they are part of a society where their voices are heard. In Denmark, Pilegaard emphasized, less than 4% are members of political parties – reflecting the lack of citizen engagement. Renewed engagement and investment in democracy, both domestically and internationally, is essential: people in excluded groups must feel that there is a space for them to *engage* in society.