

**Fourth Session of the United Nations Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the
Rule of Law**

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Panel 1. Learning through adversity: mapping pandemic-related democratic erosion.
Community of Democracies' Secretary General remarks *"Democratic erosion and taking concerted action to strengthen democracy resilience-how to advance and protect democratic freedoms, strengthen democratic institutions, and expand political participation"*.

Dear Excellencies, Distinguished Guests and Esteemed Panel,

Thank you for the invitation to join this important discussion, which will look at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on democracy, the rule of law and human rights issues across the world.

For the Community of Democracies, an intergovernmental coalition of states working to strengthen democracy and human rights, resiliency in times of global crisis such as the pandemic has been a major focus of work.

The pandemic raised many questions on how democracies should effectively respond to crises while upholding democratic values and respecting human rights. More than two years on, with many lessons learned, it is important to continue this dialogue to better understand the full impact of the pandemic on human rights and democracy and enhance multilateral efforts to strengthen democracy in the post-pandemic world, and in the face of new and emerging crises, such as the return of war to the geographic center of Europe, with the invasion of Ukraine this year.

For the world's democracies, the pandemic came at a time when trust and confidence in democratic institutions was already challenged.

The global health crisis further stretched the capacity of democracies across the world and significantly affected human rights and fundamental freedoms in many ways.

Yes, addressing the global pandemic required emergency measures necessary to protect public health.

But in some countries such measures were misused to impose restrictions on civil liberties and electoral processes.

The situation was additionally exploited as an opening to spread disinformation and misinformation.

What the pandemic showed us is that while we need to take adequate measures to keep our communities safe in times of crisis, we can't lose sight of the importance of upholding democratic values and human rights.

Democratic governance, with its openness, transparency, accountability, inclusion, and respect for human rights, is what allows our democracies to overcome challenges, embrace the lessons learned and build back better.

Multilateralism has a key role to play here, as certain challenges can only be solved through inclusive and collective action. We have the United Nations as the platform for collective cooperation

The Community of Democracies was built on the idea that democracy doesn't only move from triumph to triumph but will always face new challenges. When representatives of over 100 nations gathered for the founding conference of the Community of Democracies in the year 2000, they pledged to uphold the 19 democratic norms and principles outlined in the Warsaw Declaration. Among these principles are free and fair elections, freedom of opinion and of expression, freedom of the media, freedom of assembly and of association, and the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs.

These principles have been guiding the Community's work over the past two decades, serving as a roadmap and checklist for democratic states.

Twenty years later, in the face of the global health crisis, the 19 principles of the Warsaw Declaration proved as relevant as ever, outlining core norms and standards that must be protected and respected, to build resilience of democracies in times of crisis. **Ensuring the protection of democratic values, human rights and fundamental freedoms should always be at the core of any crisis response.**

This view has been clearly expressed by the Community of Democracies Member States in the 2021 Bucharest Statement, which stated that: 'Democracies should respond to the global pandemic through renewed adherence to democratic principles of the Warsaw Declaration.'

To all those who said democracy is ill-equipped to effectively respond to the pandemic, this statement sent a clear message: the values of the Warsaw Declaration represent the ultimate immune system of our democracies.

Democracy, despite its imperfections, is the political system best suited to protect citizens' health, while ensuring the protection of the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Effective responses to the pandemic, the post-pandemic recovery, and to any other major crisis, are found in the principles of the Warsaw Declaration, including:

- **Freedom of opinion and of expression (Principle 4) and the right of the press to collect, report, and disseminate information (Principle 7)**

As in any major crisis, the global pandemic was the time when citizens - more than ever- needed to exercise their right to access trustworthy and reliable information via independent media.

Therefore, protecting press freedom and public access to information should always be an essential part of the crisis management and building democracy resilience post-pandemic. Respecting media freedoms and enabling citizens to have a voice provides a space for exchange of views and ideas to contribute to inclusive decision-making processes and informed societies.

- **The right to peaceful assembly and association (Principle 9)**

During the pandemic when physical assemblies and gatherings were, in some cases restricted, freedom of peaceful assembly and association needed to be ensured online as well as offline, to enable engagement of citizens and civil society and realization of the freedom to voice concerns.

- **Government institutions should be transparent, participatory, and fully accountable to citizenry (Principle 16)**

Information concerning a crisis should be thoroughly justified and explained. It is also important that judicial and parliamentary checks and balances remain strengthened.

Participatory nature of democratic governance is also embodied in the legislative process. While it was necessary to quickly respond with some

extraordinary regulations, in some countries the pandemic served as an excuse for applying shortened legislation paths to laws adopted during pandemic, in most cases by skipping entirely public consultations, even though they could have been held online.

Building strong democracies equals building inclusive democracies.

Civil society was, and must be, a key partner of governments in responding to crises. It plays a vital role in raising awareness, disseminating information, framing inclusive policies, providing support to vulnerable communities, and holding governments accountable.

Democratic resiliency will never be fully achieved without the **meaningful participation of women in public life**. The pandemic exacerbated gender

inequalities in both the domestic and public domains for women. But it also highlighted the powerful impact of women's leadership on handling the pandemic, from global and local politics to healthcare to the economy.

Gender equality should be mainstreamed across all governance and policy areas. It is also important to bring to the attention of lawmakers the value of unpaid care and domestic work, which in the time of numerous lockdowns affected women's working conditions.

Youth inclusion is another key element of strengthening democracy and countering backsliding. Young people play a crucial role in shaping a more inclusive world, and it is important that democratic governments advance young people's participation in public life and their meaningful engagement in the discussions on vital issues affecting democracy and the state of the world. During the pandemic they've proved to be reliable contributors to data-gathering and fact-checking, they also developed many useful online tools and social media campaigns which helped to inform the public.

The pandemic has significantly accelerated the process of **digitalization** in all spheres of life. A lot has been done by the world's democracies, including many of the CoD Governing Council Members, to embrace the vast potential of digital technologies to strengthen democratic governance, to make governments more

transparent, accountable, and inclusive. For example, citizens benefited from online vaccination registrations systems, as well as from telemedicine.

In the CoD Bucharest Ministerial Declaration adopted in 2021, Member States recognized the significant role of new technologies to support effective and accountable democratic governance, including resilient recovery from the pandemic.

It is critical that democracies continue to foster multi-stakeholder cooperation, together with non-state actors such as the private sector, academia, and civil society, to embrace digital technologies supporting good democratic governance.

Let me say that in these difficult times of crisis when democracies are coming under tremendous pressure, is when **we need more democracy** to counter democratic erosion and ensure its resiliency.

What should be the priorities of democratic governments?

- **To strengthen democratic institutions and the rule-of-law;**
- **Make a commitment to respect and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms both at home and abroad;**
- **Increase governments' transparency and accountability; and**
- **Ensure the meaningful participation of all citizens in public life**

The pandemic has taught us that, despite different perspectives and experiences of the democracies across the world, continued cooperation among governments, civil society, private sector, and academia is crucial to effectively address current and emerging crises, make democracies stronger, more resilient, and more responsive to the citizens' needs.

In closing, There is no better way forward than through strengthening democratic solidarity and multilateral action to ensure that “all human rights, civil, cultural, economic, political and social be promoted and protected”, as stated in the Principle 19 of the Warsaw Declaration.