Team Europe Democracy (TED) Initiative

Team Europe Democracy (TED)
Working Group (WG) 2 and 3

Safeguarding Democracy and Elections in the Age of AI Webinar

1st of October 2025
14:00 - 15:00 CET (1 hour)

OUTCOME REPORT

Executive Summary

The Team Europe Democracy (TED) webinar *"Safeguarding Democracy and Elections in the Age of Artificial Intelligence"* gathered the TED Network to discuss how artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping democratic processes. Co-organised by TED Working Groups (WG) 2 and 3, the session explored AI's dual potential to empower participation and oversight, but also its risks to facilitate disinformation, surveillance and repression.

Contributions from ARTICLE19, The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and Safer Internet Lab (SAIL) at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and PurpleCode Collective highlighted shared concerns over declining democratic standards and the urgent need for rights-based, context-sensitive AI governance. Comparative evidence from elections in Africa, Asia and Latin America illustrated both the scale of manipulation through coordinated influence networks, deepfakes and algorithmic targeting and the promise of collaborative countermeasures, such as Mexico's and South Africa's innovative fact-checking and platform partnerships.

The webinar concluded that safeguarding democracy in the AI era requires locally-grounded regulation, inclusive multi-stakeholder cooperation, including South-South collaboration, and sustained investment in media and information literacy, civic education and independent oversight. AI governance must be anchored in human rights, empower the partner countries and treat citizens as active participants rather than passive consumers of information.

For Team Europe, the path forward lies in translating these principles into practice building global partnerships, strengthening institutional resilience and ensuring that digital innovation serves democracy, not power.

Setting the Scene

The discussion opened with the recognition that democratic standards are at their lowest point in two decades. This backsliding coincides with rapid advances in AI, often driven by private sector innovation and deregulation rather than democratic needs.

While AI has the potential to support participation, transparency and inclusion, it also heightens risks of disinformation, discrimination and the erosion of trust, "supercharged" by automated content creation, narrative manipulation and fake accounts. The law, as noted by ARTICLE19, is *"horribly trying to catch up"* with technology, leaving wide governance gaps.

German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) underlined that the task ahead is to *"update the guardrails, not the values"* of democracy to ensure innovation

serves people, not power. AI's governance must be rights-based, people-centred and globally inclusive, particularly of voices from partner countries.

Experts emphasised the growing geopolitical race, technological rivalry and corporate influence in AI development. This concentration of power risks sidelining democratic oversight and widening digital divides. Investment disparities and labour outsourcing reinforce a form of "digital neo-colonialism," as data extraction and model training are often outsourced to lower-income economies without adequate safeguards or compensation.

At the same time, new multilateral efforts, including the UN Global Digital Compact and the Paris AI Action Summit (2025), are shaping emerging governance frameworks. The EU's AI Act was cited as a benchmark for rights-based regulation, but participants cautioned against exporting this model wholesale without adapting to diverse political realities. Rather than a universal template, participants called for context-sensitive AI governance anchored in democratic participation, human rights and inclusion.

AI's Dual Impact on Democracy

Both the ARTICLE19 paper *"Safeguarding Democracy in the Age of Artificial Intelligence"* (commissioned by BMZ) and that of International IDEA *"Safeguarding Democracy: EU Development at the Nexus of Elections, Information Integrity and Artificial Intelligence | International IDEA"* explored the dual natura of AI in democratic, authoritarian and elections contexts.

Opportunities

Across case studies, AI was shown to enable civic innovation and accountability:

- **Participatory digital spaces** like the civic technology platform "Pol.is/Polis" (wiki survey software), that played a key role in Taiwan's legislative process, providing an innovative digital space for civic dialogue, idea exchange and policy co-creation. While in Kenya the specialised AI chatbot "Finance Bill GPT" helped citizens understand the complex details of the 2024 Finance Bill.
- **Fact-checking tools and translation algorithms** can strengthen transparency and accessibility.
- **Open-data initiatives**, such as Brazil's *Open Knowledge* projects, support institutional accountability.
- **AI can assist in oversight, detecting corruption or misinformation**, as seen in tools like the *Kenya Corruption Tracker*.

Risks

Yet the risks are equally profound:

- **Algorithmic discrimination** (e.g. childcare benefits case in the Netherlands) shows how biased data entrenches injustice.
- **Information pollution** a mix of truth and falsehood erodes trust and polarises societies.
- **Deepfakes and AI-generated content** blur reality, influencing electoral behaviour.
- **Surveillance and censorship** technologies are increasingly weaponised against dissent and minorities.

- **Over-reliance on corporate actors** threatens transparency, institutional capacity and accountability.

The tension between innovation and regulation underlines the need for AI governance that strengthens democratic values rather than undermines them.

Country Insights: Elections and Information Integrity

Comparative Country Findings

International IDEA's comparative analysis of elections in Bangladesh, Ghana, Indonesia, Mexico, Mongolia, Pakistan and South Africa highlights how artificial intelligence and disinformation intersect to shape trust, participation and equality, as well as the tactics employed to influence them.

- **Bangladesh**: a state-supported network of 8,000 online operatives blurred truth and falsehood, leveraging fake "experts" and censorship laws to silence dissent.
- **Indonesia:** AI-driven political re-branding transformed once unpopular figures into appealing, even "cute," digital personas.
- **Ghana**: coordinated hashtag campaigns and recycled news created polarisation especially as to the LGBTQIA+ communities, while paid influencers amplified divisive content.
- **Mexico**: deepfakes, doctored audio and manipulated images targeted women (gender-based attacks) and minorities, highlighting gendered dimensions of digital abuse.
- **Pakistan**: AI-generated content was weaponised but also used more creatively e.g. a jailed Imran Khan used deepfakes to address election rally speeches. Even without AI, disinformation proves highly effective and as voters are not always able to detect or debunk it, generative AI only heightens the risks.
- **South Africa**: coordinated networks and foreign interference (including Russian bots) flooded the information space, weakening genuine debate.

Across contexts, the study found that **coordinated influence networks** - hybrid ecosystems of volunteers and professionalised networks (including bots, paid actors) pose a systemic and automated threat to democratic discourse by overwhelming the information's space and legitimacy.

Indonesia Country Case

The Indonesian experience, shared by the **PurpleCode Collective** and **Safer Internet Lab**, illustrates how AI has become embedded in political campaigning and disinformation. Both foreign and domestic actors are involved.

The phenomenon of **"buzzers"** - digital operatives amplifying narratives either for political/ideological or commercial gains - shows a domestically driven, professionalised ecosystem of online propaganda. AI now automates these operations, generating realistic personas and streamlining manipulation.

During the 2024 elections, AI was used to rebrand political candidates, produce deepfakes and spread emotionally-charged narratives targeting gender, ethnicity or ideology. The **"liar's dividend"** where authentic content is dismissed as fake was a striking example, used to discredit activists and erode accountability.

The Indonesian case also highlighted the dangers of state-led AI regulations (e.g. AI Policy Roadmap 2023) without safeguards. Government's plans to deploy AI tools for detecting disinformation or advise on content removal can risk disproportionality and automating censorship, especially given prior instances of internet shutdowns (e.g. Papua Internet Shutdown 2019), politically-motivated platform restrictions (e.g. TikTok Live Ban 2025 where live streaming of protests on economic hardships and police brutality was suspended under suspected government pressure) and there being no appeals system in place for content removal by the government. Additionally, most AI tools for detection are primarily trained in English, limiting application in Indonesia's diverse linguistical and remote areas.

There was a call for holistic regulatory reform, improved transparency in political advertising and inclusion of local languages and expertise in AI governance.

Promising Countermeasures

International-IDEA also identified several positive practices that demonstrate how AI can also reinforce democratic integrity:

- **Mexico's National Electoral Institute (INE)** developed a five-pillar model combining fact-checking hubs, chatbot verification tools, cooperation with platforms and nationwide media and information literacy campaigns/programmes (*Soy Digital*).
- **South Africa's Electoral Commission (IEC)** established a multi-stakeholder framework with Google, Meta, TikTok and Media Monitoring Africa, alongside AI tools like Real411 for complaints, Africa Check and the Google News Initiative, producing AI-powered tools for verification and early warning.

Both these initiatives underlined the value of collaborative ecosystems among election bodies, civil society and platforms anchored in transparency, accountability and inclusivity. However, challenges remain in that voluntary agreements are often non-binding, coverage of local languages is limited and encrypted platforms like WhatsApp remain outside oversight.

Governance and Rights-Based Approaches

AI governance must be rooted in international human rights law, with safeguards across the AI lifecycle design, deployment and oversight.

Key recommendations included:

- Support **South-to-South collaboration** on AI governance and **knowledge-sharing**.
- **Strengthen regulation, policy, governance measures and oversight** through locally owned standards including Election Management Bodies (EMB), civil society and online platforms.
- **Set clear red lines** for unacceptable uses, including biometric mass surveillance, predictive policing, profiling-based social scoring, environmental impact and gender bias. Also **set clear rules on AI use in online campaigning and advertising especially in election periods** as often outdated, fall outside legal frameworks and lack verification mechanisms.
- **Strengthen independent institutions,** data protection authorities and set binding guidelines for EMBs. Strengthen local capacity, training and literacy (e.g. local fact-checkers). Go beyond the "usual election actors" thus focus on EMBs but also law enforcement, courts, influencers.

- **Embed human rights compliance** into legislation and AI procurement.
- **Champion people-centred AI.**
- **Empower citizens (especially youth), communities and safe independent journalism** through participation in AI strategy design, civic education and media and information literacy programmes. Citizens are active participants not just passive recipients of information. Build public trust in democratic technology.
- **Avoid one-size-fits-all models and replication.** The EU AI Act should be viewed as a "*floor, not a ceiling.*" For instance, in Indonesia, where the government plans to replicate EU models such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) and Digital Markets Act (DMA), past experiences with the Right to be Forgotten and GDPR have not translated effectively to the local context.
- **Build resilience through inclusivity**, ensuring marginalised communities are represented and protected. **Engage the private, media and digital sectors** in advancing "human rights and technology" frameworks that encourage innovation but uphold fundamental rights as non-negotiable.

These principles link closely with BMZ opening call in providing a threefold approach:

1. **Rights-based, people-centred governance**.
2. **Democratic resilience and institutional capacity**.
3. **Partner country leadership in AI governance and co-learning**.

Cross-Cutting Insights for Team Europe

1. **Locally-owned solutions** in that democracy support in the AI age must be co-created with local actors, reflecting context-specific risks, languages and political realities.
2. **Multi-stakeholder collaboration** where inclusive partnerships across government, civil society, academia and platforms are essential to regulate responsibly and ensure accountability.
3. **Trust and transparency** in tracking disinformation is not only a technical challenge but also a societal one. Rebuilding trust requires sustained civic education, independent journalism and credible institutions.
4. **Gender and inclusion** where women, youth and minority groups are disproportionately targeted and must be central to both protection and participation strategies.
5. **From regulation to resilience** where long-term investments are needed to address the root causes of information pollution inequality, polarisation and low civic trust.

Way Forward for TED

The discussions underscored that safeguarding democracy in the age of AI requires a **dual commitment**: defending against technological threats while leveraging innovation to strengthen participation, accountability and inclusion.

For TED, its Network and partners, this means:

- **Advancing policy dialogue** on AI and democracy that bridges European and partner country experiences.
- **Supporting capacity-building** for election authorities, regulators, influencers and civil society to understand and respond to AI-driven risks.
- **Promoting joint WG2–3 work** on digital governance, rights, information integrity and civic participation.

- **Encouraging responsible private sector engagement** turning commitments into measurable accountability.
- **Championing citizen-centred innovation**, ensuring that AI supports open, participatory and rights-based democracies.

Conclusion

The webinar confirmed that *"panic is not a plan,"* as ARTICLE19 framed it but neither is complacency. AI's transformative potential for democracy hinges on whether societies can embed transparency, accountability and inclusion into its governance.

As TED moves forward, the challenge is to transform this collective awareness into actionable cooperation from electoral integrity to local governance, from media and information literacy to regulatory innovation ensuring that democracy in the digital or AI age remains people-centred, participatory and resilient.