

HIGH-LEVEL EVENT CONCEPT NOTE
“IN DEFENCE OF DEMOCRACY. FIGHTING AGAINST EXTREMISM”
(September 24, 2024)

Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, President of Brazil, and Pedro Sánchez, President of the Government of Spain, are convening a side-event during the upcoming high-level week of the UN General Assembly to hold a political discussion “In defence of Democracy. Fighting against extremism”.

The high-level event will take place on September 24, 2024, in New York, 3-5PM.

The event will consist of a roundtable where leaders will discuss ways to advance democratic principles and protect democratic institutions from extremist movements, aiming to ensure free elections, the rule of law, and individual freedoms while also promoting robust, sustainable, and equitable economic growth, social inclusion and human rights.

BACKGROUND

In recent decades, the world has undergone significant transformations that are exerting strong pressure on democracies.

First, the increase in inequality has been a driving force behind growing discontent, especially among the "losers" of globalization. Despite better levels of education, health, and growth, inequality undermines global progress. In the last two decades, there has been a significant increase in inequalities within most countries, with the gap between the income of the richest 10% and the poorest 50% nearly doubling¹. The effects of the 2008 economic and financial crisis, exacerbated by the pandemic and accompanied by regressive tax systems, have left large sectors of society dissatisfied and anxious in the face of uncertainty. This has fuelled a growing sense of political disempowerment among large segments of the population, driven by the deterioration of mediating institutions such as trade unions and civil society, a growing perception of a lack of voice in the political process, and distrust in the political system.

¹ The Guardian, April 2024, “Ministers of Germany, Brazil, South Africa and Spain: why we need a global tax on billionaires”, <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2024/apr/25/ministers-of-germany-brazil-south-africa-and-spain-why-we-need-a-global-tax-on-billionaires>

Second, polarization is actively promoted and used as a political tool.

Disinformation and the spread of fake news feed on existing discontent, resulting in increasing polarization. Social media and digital media have facilitated access to information, but the excess of information also results in misinformation, a trend that the advent and widespread use of generative artificial intelligence tools will multiply in terms of depth and speed.

Fake news has become a weapon for both extremist actors. Foreign information manipulation and interference in electoral processes and, more broadly, in politics are increasing. The domestic polarization of leaders and political parties also has a negative effect. Radical movements are capitalizing on this context, marked by distrust in traditional recipes. Since 2022, the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Report has identified polarization as a barrier to addressing shared challenges.²

Third, extremism is directly threatening the rights and freedoms gained in recent decades. The consensus that sustains democracies and their social fabric is under threat. Simplistic messages captivate a growing proportion of disenchanted voters and lead them to extremist positions that often are xenophobic and sexist, and revert society to outdated debates. Actions aimed at sowing divisions based on identity, inciting hatred against social, ethnic, religious, cultural, or sexual minorities with the goal of disrupting the societies that host them. The growing coordination among far-right movements represents a serious risk of democratic regression, including the erosion of basic rights. Women's rights are at stake. LGBT rights are being undermined. Climate change and science are denied. Intolerance is increasing. Inequality is growing. Minorities are under attack.

Ultimately, democracies worldwide are under extreme pressure, and it is uncertain to what extent they can withstand it. The attacks on democratic institutions on January 6, 2021, in Washington, D.C., and on January 8, 2023, in Brasília, symbolize violent movements with common elements such as the

² UNDP, 2022, *Human Development Report, 2021-2022*,
https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2021-22reportenglish_0.pdf

rejection of democratic alternation and diversity, and the exaltation of an exclusive form of national identity.

In this context, a determined response is essential. Such a response must begin with a solid diagnosis of the root causes of discontent and distrust that fuel right-wing extremism, followed by specific and bold measures that address these causes structurally and effectively. Increasing political awareness of specific threats and building a coalition in defence of democracy should be the first steps.

FORMAT

The high-level event "In Defence of Democracy. Fighting against Extremism" will bring together leaders committed to defending democracy and combating inequality, misinformation, and extremism.

Broad geographical representation will ensure consideration of different perspectives on this reality that is affecting countries worldwide.