

Wartburg Declaration

2024

1. Introduction

We, the participants of the second Student Forum on Future Democracy 2024, are a diverse and young group united by our shared concerns for the future of European and global democracies, as well as our hope for a better tomorrow. With perspectives from nine different countries and three different continents, we have gathered in Eisenach, Germany, in October 2024 to discuss the current state and future prospects of our democracies as well as this year's focus on polarization and its threat to democracy.

Since the last Forum in 2023, we have organized ourselves in the Student Network on Future Democracy (SNFD), including past and current Forum participants. In coordination with the Society for the Study of Democratic History (GEDG), which is responsible for the project, we are involved in the planning of the annual week-long Forum in Eisenach.

Throughout our discussions, it has become apparent that the very basis of democracy is threatened in many countries by actors that question its legitimacy and efficacy. We, the Student Forum, believe that democracy should be protected, as this system strives to guarantee political rights and freedoms to every inhabitant of a country, regardless of religion, gender, nationality, age, and other characteristics. Furthermore, it is an adaptable system, which can constantly be improved upon through participation and collaboration. In that, we see the solution to many of the challenges that our home countries are facing. We strongly believe that, as students, we can contribute to this process of improvement by taking small, but conscious and consistent steps.

To this end, we have published this declaration to have a written record of both our concerns and our plan for action, based on our image of the ideal democracy. It shall serve as a guide for the Student Network on Future Democracy (SNFD) to bring our ideas to each of our universities, countries, and social networks.

2. Understanding Polarization

Polarization refers to the increasing social fragmentation and ideological divisions within societies, which can lead to political extremism. In lesser forms, it can also result in the cutting off of previously existing social connections and growing distrust toward other people and societal institutions. It is a process that evolves over time rather than a fixed state. Polarization has existed throughout human history, from early tribal conflicts and the formation of nation-states to contemporary corporate or state-propaganda machinery and heated debates on social media.

2.1 Forms and Effects of Polarization

Polarization takes various forms. “Substantial polarization” refers to deep differences of opinion, where opposing sides seem to have no common ground. “Affective polarization” refers to how people feel about those with deeply different opinions. The concept of polarization itself remains debated, as it is not inherently negative: differences of opinion can motivate people out of a state of apathy or foster societal diversity of thought. Radical ideas or uncomfortable conversations can lead to more nuanced or creative solutions to social issues that would otherwise remain unchallenged. However, extreme differences of opinion forming polar opposites can also lead to deep social divisions, with serious consequences: wars and crimes against humanity are often explained in terms of the polarization that preceded them.

2.2 Current Polarizing Issues

Certain issues, such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, migration, COVID-19, LGBTQ+ rights, climate change, and gender equality, were highlighted during the 2024 Forum as currently polarizing topics. Polarization on a specific topic can often correlate with demographic factors, such as generational differences, political affiliations, gender, ethnicity, education, income, and religion. The mechanisms by which demographic factors affect polarization are complex, as explanations for polarization often carry political undertones.

Notably, despite the Forum consisting of students from various countries and different backgrounds, no significant disagreements emerged: we collectively opposed corruption and authoritarianism and advocated for free speech, trustworthy institutions, and human rights. It was surprising, as we anticipated heated debates on current events, yet we united over a shared desire to keep our democratic rights.

2.3 The Role of Media in Polarization

The media (whether state-run, corporate, or social) plays a key role in either amplifying or mitigating polarization. Trustworthy media can help bridge divides, while biased or manipulated media often deepen them. This variation in media access and credibility across countries contributes to differing levels of polarization on key issues. At the 2024 Forum, we discussed these dynamics and observed authorities censoring social media on specific issues and authoritarian governments pushing propaganda through state-owned media.

2.4 Conceptual Boundaries of Polarization

Polarization is linked to concepts like “extremism,” “pluralism,” “tipping points,” and “passion.” While extremism can arise from polarized opinions, pluralism — the peaceful coexistence of diverse viewpoints — can benefit democratic decision-making. For instance, democratic institutions that promote diverse and passionate discussions can bring a wider range of concerns and ideas to the government. While passion is essential for motivating political engagement, it can also fuel extremism. Passion can reach a tipping point where simple differences of opinion become irreconcilable, stifling open discussion and rendering decision-making uninformed. The boundaries between passionate democratic discussion and extremism are often unclear, making it difficult to define polarization as strictly negative.

3. Examples from Member Countries

Seeing as we come from different countries, our experiences and observations of democracy and polarization differ greatly. Each system in each country also faces a different set of challenges concerning, which we illustrate in the following.

3.1 Bosnia

Corruption is widespread in Bosnia and Herzegovina, involving bribery, embezzlement, and abuse of power, especially among ethno-nationalist parties. These problems are worsened by weak anti-corruption systems, poor law enforcement, and ineffective courts, which damage public trust, affect elections, and block progress toward joining the EU. Despite some efforts from the EU, not much has improved, and experts suggest stronger laws and more transparency. The country is also divided along ethnic lines, with political leaders stirring up

ethnic tensions for their own benefit. This has caused government dysfunction and slowed reforms, particularly those aimed at ending discrimination.

3.2 Brazil

Brazilian democracy faces several challenges, including political corruption, economic inequality, and social unrest, which can undermine public trust in institutions. The country is also experiencing significant polarization, particularly around issues such as economic policy, social rights, and environmental concerns, especially regarding the Amazon Forest. This division complicates efforts to achieve consensus and effective governance. These issues significantly shape political discussions and impact civic engagement in Brazil.

3.3 Finland

The multi-party and coalition government system forces the Finns to find common ground politically. There are, of course, dividing lines, especially in value-based, but also in economic questions. The liberal "left" and the conservative "right" seem to be divided the most. In this day and age, an increasing number of people are also polarized in relation to international issues: Israel-Palestine conflict divided a lot of Finns this year.

Notably, the biggest Finnish parties are still relatively moderate overall. Social media discourse does contain elements of polarization, however the state media remains trustworthy. Although the discussion culture has hardened in Finland as well, the general tendency of the nation toward moderation creates hope that it will not polarize further, but rather have these differences fuel a healthy political discussion.

3.4 Gambia

The Gambia is in an unstable democracy right now. Compared to 10 years ago, when the country was in a military dictatorship, the situation was way better. However, it is nothing compared to the heydays when Gambia was among the top democratic countries in Africa. We now have a civilian, democratically elected president, but some of the bad laws and systems that enabled dictatorship are still in place.

With regards to polarization, this is increasingly becoming an issue. Our society is becoming more and more divided on extreme axes along religious and ethnic lines. The outlook of the situation doesn't look so good.

3.5 Germany

In Germany, democracy is facing a number of challenges, including increasing political polarisation and a loss of trust in democratic institutions. This is demonstrated, among other things, by the rise of populist movements that have the potential to aggravate social and political divisions. At the same time, debates about migration, economic inequality and climate policy are leading to tensions in society. The media landscape, especially social networks, is having an impact on these developments by allowing populists to artificially inflame certain issues.

3.6 Slovakia

Unfortunately, the case of Slovakia, after last year's elections, is being one of the most polarized countries in Europe. The country is divided in spirit and cohesion in all levels of society, national, or among individuals, stuck between pro-Western liberal prospects for the future, backed by the European Union, and left wing movements bringing back the idea of partnership with Russia.

3.7 Switzerland

The rise of affective polarization regarding the cultural cleavage shapes the party conflict and voter ideology. The two strongest parties in Switzerland, the Swiss People's Party (conservative/right) and the Social Democrats (liberal/left), are located on opposite sides of the partisan landscape. Furthermore, decreasing socioeconomic mobility as well as different educational opportunities due to the federalistic system both lead to growing social inequality. This may explain why certain social groups flock towards the largest parties on either side. But because all parties on the political spectrum are present in our parliament and government, even though in different sizes; this combats affective polarization to a degree.

3.8 Turkiye

Turkiye's democracy faces significant challenges, including the erosion of the rule of law, where judicial independence is compromised, and media censorship that limits free speech. Deep political polarization between secular and religious groups, as well as Turkish and Kurdish communities, further strains democratic cohesion. Concerns about electoral fairness and growing authoritarian tendencies, with power concentrated in the executive, also undermine trust in democratic processes. These issues collectively weaken Turkiye's democratic institutions and governance.

Further challenges include the annulment of the Istanbul Convention and the removal of elected Kurdish mayors, which raises concerns over judicial independence and political representation. The detention of figures like Selahattin Demirtaş and Osman Kavala, despite court rulings, underscores worries about human rights and adherence to democratic norms.

3.9 Ukraine

The most crucial challenge for Ukrainian democracy has been the war, which has continued for more than 10 years. Another major issue is the corruption that Ukrainian people still face today. Additionally, the intelligentsia—those knowledgeable Ukrainians who significantly contributed to Ukraine's prosperity—were killed as a result of Russian aggression.

Polarization in Ukraine focuses on four major issues: the language debate (whether there should be one state language or two), the territorial question (whether to protect or surrender the occupied territories), religious differences (between Christians and between Christians and Muslims), and the choice between NATO or forming a new association with international partners. There is also an ongoing debate about the role of women in politics.

4. Our Utopian Democracy

Due to our diverse backgrounds, the ideal democracy for each of our countries would look different. Nevertheless, through exchanging experiences and ideas, we developed a vision of the ideal democracy, achievable through positive change. From our perspective, the following points should be fulfilled in an ideal democracy:

4.1 Fighting Corruption, Increasing Political Transparency

Corruption should be eliminated, and political transparency should ensure accountability and fairness. Leaders should not exploit ethnic or religious divisions, but foster unity and trust in governance. Free and fair elections, along with an independent judiciary, should guarantee justice and uphold public confidence in the political system.

4.2 Social Inclusion

Social differences such as ethnic, religious, gender, and regional differences should be respected and integrated, fostering true social inclusion. These divisions should never be exploited for political purposes, and internal or invisible borders must be removed to promote unity. A culture of respect and equality for all groups should prevail, avoiding tensions and ensuring that everyone has a place in society.

4.3 Freedom of Speech and Media

In an ideal society, freedom of speech and respectful discourse should go hand in hand, allowing citizens to express political opinions without fear of punishment or manipulation. Political dialogue should be open, honest, and transparent, with civility prevailing in all discussions, including on social media, where diverse opinions are shared without hostility. The media should be free, independent, and fact-based, ensuring truthful reporting, while a culture of respect and constructive debate strengthens democratic engagement and encourages thoughtful participation.

4.4 Political Stability and International Cooperation

Political stability is rooted in the sovereignty of the nation and the cultivation of strong international partnerships, including trade agreements for essential exports. There should be no external forces undermining the autonomy of the state, allowing its citizens to thrive in a secure environment. By fostering cooperative relationships with other nations, societies can enhance their resilience and ensure a stable political landscape that promotes peace and collaboration. Balancing domestic concerns with international alliances and economic ties strengthens the nation while empowering its people to engage actively in shaping their future.

4.5 Democratic Participation

Democratic participation is strengthened by technology and social media, giving youth an important role in driving change. People should be active in politics not just during elections but all the time, helping to create a strong civil society that encourages conversation and involvement. By supporting ongoing participation (such as active discussion, citizens' assemblies and civil society associations) and using modern communication tools, communities can build an inclusive political environment where everyone's voice is heard and valued, leading to meaningful progress and improvement.

4.6 Human Rights

Human rights should be upheld for everyone, ensuring that all individuals have access to education, including refugees. It is essential to protect the rights of all ethnic and religious groups, promoting equality and representation in every aspect of life. By creating an environment that values diversity and inclusion, communities can empower individuals to thrive, fostering a society where everyone's rights are respected and upheld.

4.7 Humanitarian Aid and Support System

There should be a strong commitment to providing urgent support for those in need, including access to psychological assistance and improved living conditions. Social support systems should ensure welfare payments for vulnerable groups such as the elderly, those in need of healthcare, the unemployed, and refugees, while also guaranteeing equal access to education and social services for everyone. By prioritizing the well-being of all community members, society can create a safety net that empowers individuals and fosters a sense of belonging and security for everyone.

5. What Students Can Do

In the pursuit of a Utopian Democracy, we can take small, yet consistent steps to advocate for the ideals we believe in. Here are some steps we as students can take, organized according to the key components of our vision.

5.1 Fighting Corruption, Increasing Political Transparency

By involving students as election observers, we can learn more about the way elections work in our home countries and be part of the body that ensures fair and transparent elections and votes. Engaging in discussions about the importance of transparency can also help raise awareness within our communities.

5.2 Social Inclusion

Fostering respectful discourse is crucial for social inclusion. We can cultivate a mindful social media presence, ensuring that our online interactions reflect the values of civility and respect. Additionally, students in countries without censorship can support their peers in more restricted environments by sharing news and

information. Hosting meetings to discuss current events with friends and family as well as creating discussion clubs at universities will further promote an inclusive atmosphere where diverse opinions are valued.

5.3 Freedom of Speech and Media

To advocate for freedom of speech, we can initiate and participate in political education initiatives, such as organizing model elections and political debates in local high schools. This can empower young people to understand and engage in democratic processes. We can also volunteer at university newspapers that include elements of political education, fostering a culture of informed discourse.

5.4 Democratic Participation

To encourage each other's continuous democratic participation, we can keep the Alumni Network of the Student Forum up to date on local elections and votes. This will hold us accountable to participate; therefore, the Alumni Network can serve as platforms for dialogue and civic engagement. Using technology and social media, we have the opportunity to keep our growing Instagram community informed about political events and opportunities for participation, ensuring that everyone's voice can be heard. A further step that can be taken, if the instrument exists in a given country, is to get together with like-minded people to draft an initiative; this can be done by an interest group or in collaboration with a political party. Whichever way is chosen, coming together with people who share your goals and values and using the available democratic instruments to achieve change can channel frustration into something positive and meaningful, giving students back a sense of power.

5.5 Human Rights

To uphold human rights, it is vital that we don't look away from injustice, but that we are vocal about it in our respective bubbles. Utilizing social media effectively can amplify our message and connect us with wider movements. In our efforts to communicate about human rights abuses, we must make sure to protect the rights of diverse ethnic and religious groups as well as other minorities.

5.6 Humanitarian Aid and Support System

Establishing strong social support systems within our universities is vital. We can provide mental health support, either to our friends or to a wider range of people by initiating open talks. We can initiate food drives, second-hand markets or donations for humanitarian aid. By prioritizing support for our peers, we can create a nurturing environment that promotes well-being and a sense of belonging.



5.7 A Note on Protests and Demonstrations

In many of our home countries, demonstrations and protests are a tool used to make the people's voices heard. We encourage anyone with the possibility to partake in or organize such events, for example against corruption, for transparency, calling attention to human rights violations and other injustices, to do so. However, we would like to leave the reader with a word of caution. It is not always safe to participate in protests, not all countries welcome such movements. We therefore would like to warn students to stay safe, keep in touch with peers in the form of location sharing, and to cooperate with law enforcement.

By taking these steps, we can actively contribute to the realization of our vision for a Utopian Democracy, creating a more just, inclusive, and engaged society for all.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Wartburg Student Declaration 2024 embodies our collective vision for a more just and inclusive democracy. As young individuals from diverse backgrounds, we recognize the critical challenges facing democracies around the world and are committed to taking actionable steps toward positive change. By advocating for transparency, social inclusion, freedom of speech, and human rights, we can play a pivotal role in shaping the democratic landscape of our countries. Our commitment to continuous democratic participation and international cooperation reflects our belief that a better future is not only possible but achievable through our collective efforts.

We urge all students and citizens to join us in this journey, fostering dialogue, understanding, and solidarity across borders. Let this declaration serve as both a call to action and a foundation for our ongoing work in the Student Network on Future Democracy. Together, we can build the utopian democracy we envision, ensuring that every voice is heard and every individual has the opportunity to thrive.