



# GLOBAL FORUM ON MODERN DIRECT DEMOCRACY

## A Brief History of the Global Conference on Citizens' Rights

Democracy has undoubtedly proven to be the most successful system of government worldwide. Over the last 50 years, the number of people living in 'democratic' communities has multiplied. However, the total global population has also grown and, according to various research institutes, the number of authoritarian and illiberal regimes has been on the rise very recently.

One of the most remarkable trends is the direct democratisation of the world. More and more political communities – all levels, from the local to the regional, national and transnational – are adopting citizens' rights to make decisions directly via tools such as initiatives and referenda. According to the Direct Democracy Navigator [<https://www.direct-democracy-navigator.org>] – a database developed and maintained by the Swiss Democracy Foundation [[www.swissdemocracy.foundation](http://www.swissdemocracy.foundation)] and Democracy International [[www.democracy-international.org](http://www.democracy-international.org)] in collaboration with academic researchers – there are currently over 1700 direct democratic rights enshrined in the constitutions and laws of 113 countries. The establishment and exercise of these rights have led to the development of new practical applications, legal interpretations, administrative procedures, organising techniques, and information frameworks surrounding modern direct democracy.

The Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy was launched in 2008 to better understand this extraordinary development in democracy. The Forum, the first conference on citizens' democratic rights worldwide, has taken place eight times in the last ten years, in eight different countries, on five continents. And it has spawned a global network of scholars, journalists, and government and political practitioners that work to strengthen global knowledge about direct democracy and improve the procedures and practices of citizens' rights.

The Forum is coordinated by an international consortium under the leadership of the Swiss Democracy Foundation, chaired by Adrian Schmid, and Democracy International, where Global Manager for PR & Community Building Caroline Vernailen brings together the threads from all over the world. The conference is jointly chaired by the two founders of the Forum, the California journalist Joe Mathews and the Swedish-Swiss journalist Bruno Kaufmann. The Global Forum is always co-organised by a local organising committee in the host city. Each forum ends with a final declaration drawn up and adopted by the participants, which summarises the content of the conference and defines proposals for further cooperation.

# Origin and listing of previous and current Global Forums worldwide

## 2008: Aarau, Switzerland

The first Global Forum took place in October 2008 in Aarau. In the same year, the Centre for Democracy (ZDA) opened its doors there as one of the world's first university competence centres for issues of modern (direct) democracy. More than 150 participants from 30 countries attended the four-day event at the Aargauer Grand Council Building and the Aarauser Congress Centre to examine the rich potential for developing citizens' rights within the framework of representative democracies. The participants also decided to hold the Global Forum regularly in the future and Seoul was chosen as the next host city.



## 2009: Seoul, Korea

In South Korea, the following year the Global Forum focused on questions of the economic importance of modern direct democracy. From 14 to 16 September 2009, 200 experts from over 30 countries and five continents gathered for talks on the economic potential of a strong participatory democracy. A particular focus was given to successful democracies and economies in Asia, such as South Korea and Taiwan. The Global Forum was hosted by the Korea Democracy Foundation, one of the first state-funded democracy support organisations of its kind in the world. An important partner of the forum was the Swiss economic umbrella organisation Economiesuisse.



## 2010: San Francisco, USA

In 2010, the third Global Forum took place at another hotspot for citizens' rights, in the state of California on the American West Coast. More than 500 participants from all over the world (42 nations) registered for the conference at the University of California in the centre of San Francisco. The five-day event focused on the question of citizens' rights in constitution-building processes at various levels of government. The final declaration of the Forum underlined three important aspects: transparency and freedom of information, open access to the instruments of direct democracy, and the central importance of dialogue.



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### 2012: Montevideo, Uruguay

The fourth Global Forum took place in Montevideo from 14 to 16 November 2012. While much of Latin America is dominated by plebiscitary forms of direct democracy, where popular votes are decided in top-down ways that are inherently vulnerable to manipulation, Uruguay actually has deep experience with bottom-up direct democracy. The 2012 Forum, organised in cooperation with the Latin American Association of Political Scientists, developed guidelines for a democratic infrastructure. The final declaration of Montevideo stated, "In accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we firmly believe that modern direct democracy is a fundamental human right."



### 2015: Tunis, Tunisia

In May 2015, over 700 experts from more than 60 countries gathered in the Tunisian capital Tunis for the fifth Global Forum. Tunisia is regarded as the only country that managed to successfully reform in the wake of the Arab Spring. The Forum, which took place on the campus of the historic University of Carthage, was also attended by the Tunisian civil society groups that shared the Nobel Peace Prize for Tunisia's democratisation, such as the Confederation of Trade Unions, the Employers' Association, the Human Rights League and the Lawyers' Association. The final declaration, focused on modern representative democracy on the local level.

[Documentation at [www.2015globalforum.com](http://www.2015globalforum.com)]



### 2016: Donostia/San Sebastian, Spain

In November 2016, the Basque port city and European cultural capital Donostia hosted the Forum. The city government addressed the cultural dimension of direct democracy in the form of cooperative and collective action at the local and regional level. More than 400 participants from 50 countries found their way to San Sebastian to discuss how direct democratic reforms can make representative democracy more representative. The painful and relevant experiences of the Basque people in the struggle for self-determination were an important theme of the conference, which was co-organised by the Donostia/San Sebastian city government.

[Documentation at [www.2016globalforum.com](http://www.2016globalforum.com)]



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### 2018: Rome, Italy

Two years later, at the end of September 2018, the seventh Forum took place on the Roman Capitoline Hill. Its central focus: the city as the engine of modern democracy. Inspired by the Mayor of Rome and the world's first national Minister for Direct Democracy, more than 800 participants and experts from over 200 cities and 80 states drew up the first draft of a Magna Charta for Democracy Cities. It outlines what it means to be a “democracy city” and touches on diverse indicators such as public infrastructure, civic education, youth development, technology, civic participation, initiative and referendum rights, minority protection and participatory governance. Representatives of the city governments of Seoul, Taichung, Vienna, Milan, Bern, Rome, Barcelona, Madrid and Reykjavik took part in the Roman Forum.

[Documentation at [www.2018globalforum.com](http://www.2018globalforum.com)]



**In the first 10 years** of the Global Forum network, many civil society, university, private sector and state actors participated in the forum. These included among others the Council of Europe, the European Union, the World Bank, the United Nations, ASEAN, International IDEA, Arizona State University, the University of California, Catholic University in Uruguay, the University of Carthage, The Catholic University of Daegu, Korea Democracy Foundation, the Centre for Democracy Arau, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Balkan Assist Association, the Swiss Confederation, Mehr Demokratie, Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, the Initiative and Referendum Institute, the Omnibus for Direct Democracy, the Liechtenstein Institute, the Forum of Federations, Swissinfo, the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Bergische Universität Wuppertal and the Atelier pour la Démocratie Directe in St-Ursanne in Switzerland.

In addition to the Direct Democracy Navigator database, **the most important joint “products”** of the Global Forum include the “Global Passport to Modern Direct Democracy” and a networking platform, [democracy.community](http://democracy.community), hosted by Democracy International, which will be presented in connection with the 2019 Global Forum in Taichung, Taiwan. The next edition of the Forum will also see the full adoption of the Magna Charta of Democracy Cities and the establishment of a new International League of Democracy Cities.





## **And the Global Forum will keep meeting:**

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### **2019: Taichung, Taiwan**

The forum will take place from 2 to 5 October 2019 at the National Chung Hsing University in Taiwan's second largest city, Taichung, and will focus on the opportunities to develop democratic movements in Asia and build institutionalised modern representative democracies with comprehensive citizen participation rights. More information can be found at: **2019globalforum.com**.



### **2020: Bern, Switzerland**

The venue for 2020 has also already been decided: next year, the world's largest conference on modern direct democracy will return to Switzerland. The 2020 Forum will take place in Bern, from 23 until 26 September.



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