

## International Travel Report: Athens Democracy Forum 2025

From 30 September to 3 October 2025, I attended the Athens Democracy Forum in Athens, Greece. The title of this year's Forum, *New Visions for Hard Realities*, was apt. This was not a conference for democratic self-congratulation. It was a conference about democracy under strain: strained by public distrust, by geopolitical disorder, by disinformation, by the rise of authoritarian habits and, this year above all, by the disruptive force of artificial intelligence.

That gave the Forum a seriousness that many international gatherings lack. The organisers — the Democracy & Culture Foundation, in association with *The New York Times* — had assembled not only an impressive list of names, but a programme that felt intellectually joined up. Parliamentarians, ministers, mayors, academics, journalists and civic leaders were not there to pay homage to democracy in the abstract. They were there to ask a sharper question: how can democratic institutions remain credible, responsive and human in a world growing faster, harsher and harder to govern?

The centre of gravity this year was AI. That was a sensible choice. Artificial intelligence now sits at the junction of some of the defining anxieties of modern democratic life: truth and falsehood, speed and scrutiny, convenience and control, innovation and accountability. The opening **AI, Ethics and Democracy** sessions went straight to those tensions. Dimitris Papastergiou, Greece's Minister of Digital Governance, framed the issue crisply when he said that technology must remain "a servant, not a master". Achilleas Tsaltas, President of the Democracy & Culture Foundation, set AI in the larger democratic context: the question is not simply what these systems can do, but what kind of political order they strengthen.

That opening conversation, featuring Stathis Kalyvas of Oxford and Hélène Landemore of Yale, was especially useful because it refused both the easy utopianism and the ritual alarmism that so often disfigure discussions of technology. The issue was not whether AI is "good" or "bad". It was whether democratic institutions are capable of shaping it before they are overtaken by it. That theme ran through much of the week.

It was developed further in **Harnessing AI to Strengthen Democracy in the Age of Geopolitical Upheaval**, where Brando Benifei of the European Parliament, Despina Spanou of the European Commission and Martyna Bildziukiewicz of the European External Action Service discussed AI not as a futuristic abstraction but as an accelerant of existing democratic risks. One point made with real force was that security and AI are now inseparable. Disinformation, cyber-vulnerability and foreign information manipulation are no longer adjacent concerns. They are part of the same problem. The same technologies that can help institutions become more resilient can also be used to divide societies, distort elections and corrode trust at speed and scale.

What mattered here was not just the diagnosis, but the tone. These were not starry-eyed evangelists for disruption, nor were they simply technophobic regulators. The better contributions recognised that democracies face a double imperative: they must defend themselves against malicious uses of AI while also learning how to use it intelligently and legitimately in public life. Otherwise, they risk the worst of both worlds: vulnerability without competence.

Alongside the main programme, I took part in the **Parliamentary Caucus on AI, Trust and Leadership**, an invitation-only track for legislators. This was among the most valuable parts of the visit, precisely because it moved from commentary to application. It asked not merely what parliamentarians should think about AI, but how they should work with it, where they should draw lines, and what sorts of tools might genuinely strengthen democratic institutions rather than diminish them.

One session in particular stood out: a collaborative workshop in which participants were asked to design an AI tool for parliamentarians. This was not a gimmick. It was a disciplined exercise in institutional imagination. We were invited to think through what such a tool should actually do, who it should serve, what its persona should be, what kinds of questions it should answer, and what kinds of questions it should never answer. In other words, the discussion was not about AI in the abstract. It was about use, boundaries, ethics and trust.

What emerged was revealing. The most persuasive conception was not of a synthetic politician or an all-knowing oracle, but of a serious virtual assistant: something capable of helping with legislative comparison, evidence synthesis, policy mapping and the framing of options across jurisdictions. I found myself describing the ideal as a kind of global policy shop in your pocket, which seemed to resonate with others in the discussion. The point is not to replace judgment, persuasion or politics. It is to reduce drudgery, widen comparative research, and improve the quality of information available to elected representatives who will always find themselves under extreme time pressure.

That workshop was especially valuable because it informed my later contribution to the CPA forum on AI. It helped crystallise a view I had already been moving towards: that parliaments should not simply become customers for off-the-shelf tools built elsewhere and on other assumptions. They should collaborate in developing tools together. That was reflected in the recommendation our delegation made at the CPA forum: that legislatures should work collectively, rather than separately, to shape trustworthy parliamentary AI tools rooted in democratic needs and public values.

The caucus also confronted another hard truth. AI is not only changing governance. It is changing representation. One speaker argued that parliamentarians are now dealing with a “new kind of constituent”, not because citizens themselves are fundamentally

different, but because the informational environment around them is. More political communication is filtered through algorithmic systems. More people encounter summaries rather than sources, sentiment rather than argument, conviction rather than evidence. That makes parliamentary scrutiny more demanding, not less. It also means that questions of bias, training data, transparency and auditability can no longer be left to technical specialists alone. They are important democratic questions.

The wider Forum usefully refused to let AI swallow everything else. It kept returning to a deeper point: these technologies are arriving in societies already tired, polarised and mistrustful. The opening plenary, **Rethinking the World Order**, brought together figures including Bjørn Berge of the Council of Europe, Martin Hojsík of the European Parliament, Hélène Landemore and Danilo Türk to debate whether the rules-based international order is being actively dismantled or simply allowed to fray. But the session's real significance lay in what it implied for domestic politics. Democracies do not fail only when they are overthrown. They also fail when citizens slowly cease to believe that institutions can listen, decide or deliver.

That same thought came through more directly in **Rethinking Populism: Tapping Into Discontent**, with Ivan Krastev, Neha Sahgal and Stefanos Kasselakis among the panellists. This was one of the stronger sessions because it refused to treat populism as merely a communications problem or a defect in the electorate. It treated it instead as a symptom of estrangement: estrangement from institutions, from expertise, from systems that still speak the language of democracy but often no longer convey agency, fairness or control. That seemed to me exactly right. Democracies do not out-argue populism simply by urging voters to calm down. They do so by becoming more intelligible, more responsive and more effective.

Another strength of the programme was its practical concern with democratic renewal. The **NGO Impact Showcase on Civic Education, Information Ecosystems and Deliberative Democratic Processes** brought in examples of democratic work from outside the usual circle of institutional actors. There were also sessions on civic activation, online democratic engagement and storytelling as a vehicle for change. That emphasis mattered. It suggested that democracy will not be renewed by institutions talking only to themselves. It will be renewed, if at all, by rebuilding the habits and channels through which citizens feel that politics belongs to them.

That is not a minor point for the Senedd. As our institution evolves, the question of democratic depth will become more important, not less. A parliament can be procedurally sound and still feel distant. It can be formally accountable and still seem remote. The discussions in Athens were a useful reminder that participation, intelligibility and trust are not decorative extras. They are part of the operating system of a healthy democracy.

The sessions on AI and work were also more substantial than many such discussions tend to be. In **The AI Factory as a Business Model**, speakers such as Christoforos Anagnostopoulos and Michalis Kassimiotis debated Europe's attempt to build technological capacity without merely copying the scale-first model of the United States or the command-heavy approach associated with China. The most useful point made there was that the challenge is not just infrastructure or computational power. It is adoption, trust and practical capability. Building systems is one thing. Getting institutions, firms and workers to use them wisely is quite another.

That thread continued in **Dangers and Opportunities: Sandboxes and Safe Harbors**, which turned to the future of work and the social meaning of AI. This was one of the better sessions of the week because it moved past the stale question of whether AI will "take jobs" and into a more serious discussion about what kind of work democratic societies should want to preserve. Several speakers emphasised that the key issue is not efficiency alone. It is dignity, agency and autonomy. Human beings are not interchangeable with AI systems, nor should public policy treat them as though they were. One argument put with particular force was that the goal should be the augmentation of human capacities, not their replication or displacement. Another was that we need not only more productivity, but more human and inclusive oversight, especially where digital systems are beginning to shape the conditions of work itself.

That was one of the recurrent virtues of the Forum. At its best, it treated democracy not simply as a constitutional arrangement but as a moral and civic ecology. It matters not only who votes and who governs, but what kind of information circulates, what kind of work is rewarded, what kind of dignity is protected and what kind of truth survives contact with political power.

The Forum also displayed an important moral seriousness. Maria Ressa's **Aristotle Address** returned to themes that echoed across the week: the corrosion of truth, the dangers of concentrated platform power, and the cost paid by those who continue to insist on public honesty in an era that often rewards manipulation. The presentation of the **City of Athens Democracy Award** to Gideon Levy had similar force. The underlying point was clear enough: democracy depends not only on institutions, but on the willingness of journalists, citizens and public figures to speak plainly when institutions themselves are under pressure to avert their gaze.

So what did I bring back from Athens?

First, a stronger sense that legislatures need to become more technologically literate without becoming technocratic. The task is not to imitate Silicon Valley. It is to remain capable of scrutinising power, setting standards and preserving human responsibility.

Second, a clearer conviction that parliamentary collaboration on AI tools is not optional. The question is no longer whether such tools will exist. It is whether democratic institutions will have any serious role in shaping them.

Third, a reminder that trust is more practical than presentational. Citizens will not trust institutions because those institutions discover a softer vocabulary. They will trust them if they appear fair, capable, and honest.

Fourth, a renewed appreciation that democratic innovation has to be relevant and useful. Better deliberation, stronger information integrity, wider civic education and more thoughtful technological design are not ornamental. They are part of the machinery by which democracy either renews itself or decays.

Athens, of course, provides enough symbolism for any democracy conference. But the value of this visit did not lie in the backdrop. It lay in the seriousness of the conversations and in their direct relevance to the work of a modern legislature.

Democracy now has to prove itself not only morally but operationally. It has to show that it can still listen, still govern, still adapt and still deserve consent in a world of frayed attention and algorithmic speed.

That is a global lesson. It is also one directly relevant to Wales and to the future work of the Senedd.