

Freedom Marathon | GDC Europe Forum 2025

March 15, 2025 | Milan, Italy

Introduction

On March 15, 2025, Atlas, in collaboration with the Global Democracy Coalition (GDC), hosted the Freedom Marathon | GDC Europe Forum 2025 in Milan, Italy. This one-day international gathering brought together citizens, activists, policymakers, and experts to explore the formation of a values-based global pro-freedom coalition. The event addressed the pressing need for democracies worldwide to support freedom struggles amidst rising authoritarianism and the polarization of democratic values by exploring the idea of establishing a global coalition for freedom.

Main takeaways

Atlas and the Global Democracy Coalition convened this event to gather a wide group of individuals dedicated to the cause of democracy and freedom and imagine a way forward in this extremely difficult geopolitical conjuncture for freedom and democracy.

Throughout the day, participants engaged in critical discussions on the threats to democracy, the need for a new international order, and the role of youth in shaping the future. Keynote speakers such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Kenneth Roth provided compelling insights into the challenges and opportunities in the fight against authoritarianism. A consultation with participants generated innovative proposals, from creating a global Democracy Caucus to the idea of creating a societal democracy focused on listening to citizens' needs with a bottom-up approach.

One of the most powerful takeaways from the event was the shared understanding that democracy is not a passive ideal but an active responsibility. As one participant put it, "Freedom is not given; it is taken. We must take it together." This sentiment echoed throughout the discussions, reinforcing the urgency of coordinated action.

The Freedom Marathon | GDC Europe Forum 2025 was not just a conference—it was a call to action. Now, the real work begins. The fight for democracy requires sustained effort, collaboration, and resilience. As we leave Milan, we do so with a renewed commitment to ensuring that freedom is not just an aspiration, but a lived reality for all.

For those who attended and those who followed from afar, the message is clear: We will not stand by. We will act. We will build a world where democracy thrives.



Event Overview

- **Date & Time:** Saturday, March 15, 2025, 9:00 AM - 6:00 PM
- **Location:** Cascina Cuccagna, Via Privata Cuccagna, 2/4, 20135 Milano & Online
- **Languages:** English and Italian, with translation provided

AGENDA	
9.00 - 9.30 am	Light breakfast & Networking
9.30 - 10.00 am	Welcome Remarks from Atlas & GDC representatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Andrea Venzon, Co-founder, Atlas • Elisenda Ballesté Buxó, Project Coordinator, GDC (online)
10.00 - 10.15 am	Message of Support of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President-in-exile, Belarus (online)
10.15 - 10.45 am	Practical Toolkit Youth at the Forefront of Democracy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bernard Dika, Spokesperson, Presidente Regione Toscana
11.00 - 11.30 am	Keynote Speech <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oleksandra Romantsova, Executive Director of the Center for Civil Liberties in Ukraine - Nobel Prize Winner 2022
11.30 - 13.00 pm	Panel Do we need a new international order to stand up for freedoms? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carine Kanimba, Spokesperson, World Liberty Congress • George Katrougalos, UN Independent Expert • Oleksandra Romantsova, Executive Director of the Center for Civil Liberties in Ukraine • Virginia Fiume, Fellow, EUI (online) • Colombe Cahen-Salvador, Co-founder, Atlas • Moderator: Matteo Magnani, Policy Lead Atlas Italy
13.00 - 14.30 pm	Lunch break (not provided)
14.30 - 15.00 pm	Keynote speech The Global Contest Between Autocracy and Democracy: More Complicated Than It Seems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kenneth Roth, Professor, Princeton University (online)
15.10 - 16.50 pm	Consultations Imagine: How Could The Coalition We Need to Look Like? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carine Kanimba, Spokesperson, World Liberty Congress • George Katrougalos, UN Independent Expert on the Promotion of a Democratic and Equitable International Order • Maura Gancitano, Philosopher, Tion (online) • Moderator: Julian Gerth, Community Team Leader
17.00 - 18.00 pm	Panel What Can Italy Do on Global Freedoms? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brando Benifei, MEP, Democratic Party (online) • Giulia Pastorella, National Deputy, Azione (online) • Pierfrancesco Maran, MEP, Democratic Party • Ruslana Tkach, Segretaria UAMI • Andrea Venzon, Co-founder, Atlas • Moderator: Elena Baggio, Policy Lead of Atlas Italy
18:00 pm	Closing remarks & next steps <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colombe Cahen-Salvador, Co-founder, Atlas

Welcome Remarks (9:30-10:00 AM)

Speakers:

- **Andrea Venzon**, Co-founder, Atlas
- **Elisenda Ballesté Buxó**, Project Coordinator, GDC (online)

The event opened with a powerful call to action, emphasizing the urgency of global democratic unity. Andrea Venzon welcomed participants and reinforced Atlas' commitment to citizen-led democracy. He stated, *"The situation in the world dark, especially around fundamental freedom. It's time to change the tide"* Venzon discussed the changing landscape of activism and political engagement, reflecting on how civic participation has waned in recent years. He noted, *"When I started doing politics and activism six or seven years ago, the world was different. People were engaged, there was a sense of momentum. But today, we see hesitation, a fear of standing up."*

He urged attendees to recognize the stakes, emphasizing that democracy is not self-sustaining, but we need to push back against authoritarianism with coordinated, strategic action. It is not enough to believe in democracy; we must actively work to defend and strengthen it. He underscored the importance of international cooperation, as No one country or movement can do this alone. The threats to democracy are global, and our response must be global too.

Elisenda Ballesté Buxó followed with remarks on the role of transnational collaboration in resisting democratic decline. She outlined the Global Democracy Coalition's vision for fostering cross-border alliances and supporting grassroots movements. She highlighted the importance of civic participation, underscored the role of active citizenship in advancing and strengthening democracy, and outlined how the Europe Forum 2025 is just the first of the regional forum that GDC will lead on all continents in the next few weeks, in a truly global democratic effort.

The session ended with an open invitation for participants to actively engage throughout the day, share ideas, and contribute to shaping a new global movement for democracy.



Keynote Address by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (10:00-10:15 AM)

Speaker: **Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya**, President-in-exile of Belarus (online)
 Video recording available [here](#).

President-in-exile Tsikhanouskaya delivered a passionate and urgent address about the ongoing struggle for democracy in Belarus and beyond. She began by reflecting on the situation in the country, *"five years ago, Belarusians chose democracy. They stood up, voted, and demanded a better future. But their votes were stolen"*, and how it's fundamental to keep resisting the rising dictatorships.

She emphasized the importance of international solidarity, warning that *"authoritarian regimes do not stay within their borders; they export oppression, fear, and propaganda."* Tsikhanouskaya called on democratic nations and movements to coordinate their efforts, arguing that fragmented responses allow autocrats to maintain control.

Addressing the participants of the Forum directly, she asked for continuous support and resistance: *"Belarusians are standing strong. Despite arrests, torture, and exile, we continue to resist. We need your voices, your advocacy, and your support."* She urged the global community to take concrete steps, such as enforcing sanctions against dictatorial regimes and supporting independent media.

The address concluded with a powerful call to action: *"Freedom is not given; it is taken. We must take it together."* The audience responded with resounding applause, inspired by her resilience and commitment to democratic values.

Practical Toolkit: Youth at the Forefront of Democracy (10:15-10:45 AM)

Speaker: Bernard Dika, Spokesperson, President of Regione Toscana

Bernard Dika delivered an energetic and motivational session, emphasizing the critical role young people must play in defending democracy. He began by acknowledging the challenges that youth face in today's political climate, stating, *"Young people are often told they are the future, but the truth is, we must act now. If we wait, there may be no democracy left for us to inherit."*

He highlighted the growing political disengagement among young generations and the dangers of apathy, noting that authoritarian regimes thrive when citizens become passive. *"Silence is compliance,"* he warned, urging attendees to take an active role in their communities.

Dika provided several examples of why it's fundamental to bind forces together across the planet, as global challenges keep on rising, like a warming planet and wars. He also shared success stories from his own political journey, explaining how grassroots efforts in Italy led to tangible democratic reforms. One of the key takeaways from the session was his statement: *"If you think your voice doesn't matter, remember this: every revolution in history started with one person deciding to take a stand."*

The session concluded with an interactive discussion where participants shared their own experiences and asked for guidance on how to navigate challenges in political engagement. Dika left attendees with a powerful message: *"Don't wait for permission to change the world. Start now."*

Keynote speech: On Ukraine (11:00 AM-11:30 AM)

Speaker: Oleksandra Romantsova, Executive Director, Center for Civil Liberties

Ms. Romantsova, Executive Director of the Center for Civil Liberties in Ukraine - 2022 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate - addressed the audience to present a clear overview of the situation in Ukraine and the appalling situation of Ukrainians in occupied territories. She provided detailed accounts from the invaded country and stated that there could not be real peace without Ukrainian involvement and leadership in the peace negotiations. She called upon the international community not to let dictators get their way as this does not lead to peace, but more destruction and war.

Panel Discussion: Do We Need a New International Order to Stand Up for Freedoms? (11:30 AM-1:00 PM)

Speakers:

- **Carine Kanimba**, Spokesperson, World Liberty Congress
- **George Katrougalos**, UN Independent Expert on Democratic and Equitable International Order
- **Oleksandra Romantsova**, Executive Director, Center for Civil Liberties
- **Virginia Fiume**, Fellow, European University Institute (online)
- **Colombe Cahen-Salvador**, Co-founder, Atlas

Moderator: Matteo Magnani, Policy Lead, Atlas Italy

This panel delved into the question of whether current international structures are equipped to defend democratic freedoms in an era of rising authoritarianism. Matteo Magnani opened the discussion by highlighting the limitations of existing institutions, stating, *"The United Nations was designed in a different era. Can it still be effective in protecting democracy today?"*

Carine Kanimba stressed the need for grassroots movements to lead the charge in pushing governments to act. *"If we wait for politicians to act, it will be too late. Citizens must pressure institutions to be accountable,"* she asserted, citing her experience advocating for human rights globally.

Oleksandra Romantsova maintained a similar line than the one presented in her keynote, elaborating on the need for democracies and countries that respect international law to bind together to protect what's left of the rule-based order and resist against authoritarian attacks.

George Katrougalos provided insight into how the UN could be reformed to better promote democracy. He suggested that international organizations need to shift from passive condemnations to active enforcement mechanisms, arguing, that the world has seen several treaties about democracy, but without enforcement, they are just words on paper.

Virginia Fiume introduced the idea of using citizen assemblies as a means of creating a more direct democratic order beyond state structures. *"We often see diplomacy as something that happens between governments. But what if diplomacy also included direct participation from global citizens?"* she asked, proposing transnational forums where citizens could influence policy.

Colombe Cahen-Salvador closed the discussion by advocating for increased cross-border activism. *"Democracy cannot be confined by borders. We need global alliances that challenge authoritarianism wherever it emerges,"* she stated, reinforcing the need for a new coalition that would actively coordinate responses to democratic crises.

The discussion concluded with audience participation, where attendees emphasized the necessity of practical measures. One participant remarked, *"We don't just need statements of support. We need concrete actions, legal mechanisms, and resources to empower those fighting for democracy on the ground."*



Keynote Speech: The Global Contest Between Autocracy and Democracy (2:30-3:00 PM)

Speaker: Kenneth Roth, Professor, Princeton University (online)

Moderator: Colombe Cahen-Salvador, Co-Founder, Atlas

Summary: Kenneth Roth delivered a thought-provoking keynote address on the intensifying global struggle between democratic and autocratic forces. He began by analyzing how authoritarian regimes have evolved, stating, *"Autocracies today are more sophisticated than in the past. They no longer rely solely on brute force; they use technology, economic pressure, and propaganda to sustain their rule."*

Roth outlined the strategic methods autocrats employ to maintain control, such as the spread of disinformation, internet surveillance, and the co-opting of international organizations. *"China, Russia, and others are not just resisting democracy at home; they are actively exporting their model to weaken democratic institutions abroad,"* he warned.

Addressing the audience, Roth emphasized that democracies must not only play defence but also take proactive steps to promote human rights globally. *"If democracies do nothing but react, they will lose ground. We need to go on the offensive-supporting independent media, strengthening civil society, and ensuring economic policies that favour democratic development."*

He also warned about complacency within democratic nations, urging citizens to hold their governments accountable. *"Democracies do not die in a single moment; they erode gradually. We must act before it is too late."* Roth called for stronger alliances among democratic nations and an investment in countering authoritarian narratives.

The keynote concluded with a call to action where Roth highlighted that defending democracy is not just the responsibility of politicians or NGOs but a duty of every citizen who values freedom and justice. His words were met with enthusiastic applause, underscoring the urgency and importance of his message.

Consultations: Imagining the Coalition We Need (3:10-4:50 PM)

Speakers:

- **Carine Kanimba**, Spokesperson, World Liberty Congress
- **George Katrougalos**, UN Independent Expert on the Promotion of a Democratic and Equitable International Order
- **Maura Gancitano**, Philosopher, Tlon (online)

Moderator: **Julian Gerth**, Community Team Leader

This interactive session invited participants to contribute ideas on how a global pro-freedom coalition could be structured and what its core objectives should be. The session began with Maura Gancitano highlighting the role of philosophical and cultural engagement in the fight for democracy. She suggested that the coalition should not only focus on policy and activism but also on shaping narratives around democracy and freedom. *"Authoritarian regimes invest heavily in shaping public perception. We need to counter that by promoting a culture of democratic values,"* she explained.

Carine Kanimba then emphasized the need for an organized and unified approach to supporting democracy worldwide. *"Movements cannot operate in isolation. We need a coalition that can provide legal aid, financial support, and visibility to activists who are risking their lives,"* she said. George Katrougalos followed by discussing the necessity of a legal framework that would hold authoritarian leaders accountable for human rights abuses. *"International laws exist, but they*

are often unenforced. A coalition like this could push for real consequences for those who undermine democracy," he argued.

Examples of issues identified by participants:

- Prioritizing national interests over collective global interests.
- How governments restrict freedom under the pretext of national security.
- Weakness of international law and leaders not respecting it.
- Countries selectively supporting or ignoring freedom struggles based on political convenience.
- Individual inaction: people think but don't act and don't know how to act.
- The growing narrative from the far right and authoritarian regimes undermining democratic principles.
- Governments acting primarily in their economic interests rather than in the common good.
- The need to clearly define what rights should be protected under the concept of freedom.

Examples of proposals identified by participants:

- Establishing an **International Legal Defense Fund** to support political prisoners and democracy activists facing persecution.
- Creating a **Global Transparency Platform** that would monitor and publicly expose human rights violations and corruption in authoritarian regimes.
- Launching a **Democracy Support Network**, connecting grassroots activists worldwide and providing them with resources and training.
- Developing a **coordinated media strategy** to amplify pro-democracy voices and counter authoritarian propaganda.
- A **global governance system** with binding power, funded through taxation, to enforce international law.
- A **Democracy Caucus** with economic incentives (trade, movement, funding) for member countries, and penalties for nations that violate international law.
- **Strengthening civil society organizations to provide checks and balances against government overreach.**
- **Abolishing the veto power & reforming the UN Security Council to make global governance more democratic.**
- **Establishing a World Government where every citizen can vote, making leaders directly accountable to the global public.**
- **Promoting the principle that people are sovereign individually and delegate their sovereignty to democratic structures.**
- **Enforcing international laws through sanctions, jurisdiction of international courts, and, in extreme cases, military intervention.**
- **Giving global governance the monopoly on legitimate force to uphold international law and protect democracy.**

After the working groups concluded, participants came together in the plenary to vote on the final proposals. One participant passionately summarized the urgency of action, stating, *"If we*

want to change the world, we need more than statements. We need action, coordination, and accountability." **Overall Solutions Emerging from the Consultations:**

- Creating a **societal democracy** through bottom-up participation, focused on listening constantly to people's needs
- Establishing a **universal civil service** to foster collaboration, decrease divisions between people, and then could engage the whole world in peacekeeping.
- Organizing **community-driven democratic engagement** similar to religious or cultural gatherings to strengthen civic participation.
- Implementing a **Democracy Caucus** to coordinate international democratic efforts.

The session ended with a commitment from Atlas to integrate these ideas into its policy framework, with further discussions planned in follow-up meetings to solidify the coalition's structure and objectives.

Panel Discussion: What Can Italy Do on Global Freedoms? (5:00-6:00 PM)

Speakers:

- **Giulia Pastorella**, National Deputy, Azione (video message)
- **Andrea Venzon**, Co-founder, Atlas
- **Ruslana Tkach**, General Secretary, UAMI

Moderator: **Elena Baggio**, Policy Lead, Atlas Italy

Originally set to include multiple Italian policymakers, the panel was adjusted as Brando Benifei and Pierfrancesco Maran were unable to attend because of a pro-Europe March in Rome. Giulia Pastorella instead contributed through a recorded video message, while Andrea Venzon, Ruslana Tkach, and Elena Baggio led an open discussion with the audience.

In her video message, Pastorella emphasized the importance of Italy playing a stronger role in defending global democracy, stating, *"Italy has a responsibility within the EU to stand for democratic values, especially as authoritarian influence grows across the continent."* She stressed the need for economic and diplomatic tools to promote democracy abroad and protect activists seeking refuge in Europe.

Andrea Venzon expanded on this, highlighting the gaps in Italy's current foreign policy. He noted, *"While Italy has often expressed support for democracy, we need concrete policies that go beyond rhetoric-such as stronger sanctions on oppressive regimes and more support for civil society groups operating in difficult conditions."*

Ms. Tkach instead focused her intervention on the role of Ukrainian civil society in Italy and how education and information are key to ensuring that dictators' propaganda do not cloud the judgement of citizens in a democracy. She also stressed how Italy has been supportive to Ukraine, even if a segment of the population is indeed misinformed on the situation on the ground.

The session transitioned into an interactive discussion, where attendees debated what practical steps Italy could take. Several participants called for Italy to leverage its position within the European Union to advocate for a more coordinated democracy-promotion strategy and a joint

defense. Others emphasized the role of local governments, with one attendee stating, *"Even at the city level, Italian mayors and regional leaders can engage in democracy promotion by supporting human rights initiatives and welcoming political refugees."*

The session concluded with a commitment to further policy recommendations that would be shared with Italian legislators, ensuring that the ideas discussed in the panel translate into real political action.

Closing Remarks & Next Steps (6:00 PM)

The event concluded with a strong commitment to action. Atlas announced the intention to integrate the outcomes of the consultation into their political work and attendees were invited to join Atlas and GDC networks. In terms of concrete next steps:

- Participants are highly invited to join Atlas' volunteer team and start the design of a global coalition for freedom, as well as campaigning on related issues: <https://www.atlasmovement.org/volunteer>
- GDC is currently carrying on regional Forums on other forums and continues to champion democracy to several campaigns and actions. To stay up to date, participants can subscribe to their newsletter here: <https://globaldemocracycoalition.org/newsletter-signup-form/>

Resources

For more information and to access event materials, visit the [Atlas Movement website](https://atlasmovement.org) or contact Atlas at info@atlasmovement.org