
Human Rights and a Just Society
The 17th Symposium

**Democracy in Crisis: Authoritarian Rule and
Its Impact on Human Rights and the Rule of
Law**

Presented at
The University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland
Faculty of Political Science and International Studies
October 13 and 14, 2025

Professor Jan Baszkiewicz Auditorium, Auditorium Building
ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927 Warsaw

Co-sponsors:

The Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw,
Warsaw, Poland

The John Felice Rome Center (JFRC) of Loyola University Chicago, Rome, Italy

(All events will be held at the Professor Jan Baszkiewicz main auditorium of the
Faculty of Political Science and International Studies at the above address.)



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Monday, October 13th, 9:30 a.m. – 4:45 p.m.

Theme: Understanding Democratic Erosion and Authoritarian Strategies

9:30–9:45 Opening Remarks

- **John Kurowski** – Conference Chair
- **Prof. Maciej Raś** – Vice-Rector for Student Affairs, University of Warsaw
- **Dr. John Merchant**, Director of the **Polish Studies Program** College of Arts and Sciences, Loyola University Chicago
- **Prof. Agnieszka Bieńczyk-Missala** – Vice-Dean for International Relations, University of Warsaw

Panel 1: Democracy in Crisis

9:45–11:15

- **The Honorable Virginia Kendall** – *The Pillars of Democracy and How They Are Under Attack*, Chief Judge, U.S. District Court, Northern District of Illinois
- **Sylwia Gregorczyk-Abram** – *How Democracies Die*, Chairwoman of the Committee for Clarification of the Mechanisms of Repression against Civil Society Organizations and Social Activists
- **Dr. Alexandru Grigorescu** – *Democracy and Human Rights: How They Overlap and How they differ*, Professor of Political Science, Loyola University Chicago

11:15–11:30 Break

11:30–12:00 Discussion: Judge Kendall, Ms. Gregorczyk-Abram, and Dr. Grigorescu

Moderator: Juliet Sorensen – Clinical Professor of Law and the Director of Loyola University Chicago's Rule of Law Institute and Program in Rule of Law for Development



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Monday, October 13th

12:00–12:45 How Polish Judges Fought to Keep Their Independence

A Conversation with Marcin Mrowicki and Prof. Michał Balcerzak

Marcin Mrowicki professor at the University of Warsaw Centre for Europe will discuss his landmark study – **All Rise! How Polish Judges Fought to Keep Their Independence** with Polish Human Rights lawyer and Nicolaus Copernicus University Professor **Michał Balcerzak**.

12:45–1:30 Lunch Break (on the premises)

Panel 2: Backsliding into Authoritarianism: Manipulating the Media

1:30–3:00 Discussion:

- **Eva Cosse** – Senior Researcher for Europe, Human Rights Watch, Athens
- **Thodoris Chondrogiannos** – Investigative Journalist, Athens
- **Ivan Godarsky** – Legal and Media Expert, MEMO98 (media and election monitoring NGO), Bratislava, Slovakia

Moderator: William Mahoney – Chicago Council on Global Affairs Chairman's Circle and Human Rights Watch Policy Committee

3:00–3:15 Break



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Monday, October 13th

Panel 3: Workshop: Social Media and Democracy – Risks and Challenges

This workshop explores the complex relationship between social media and democratic processes, focusing on the opportunities and risks it brings to political communication, public debate, and civic engagement. After a short introduction to the topic, students will present case studies highlighting different challenges, such as disinformation, polarization, surveillance, or manipulation of public opinion. The presentations will be followed by a moderated discussion with all participants, encouraging critical reflection on the broader threats posed by social media to democratic institutions and values. The workshop will conclude with a summary of key insights and takeaways.

3:15–4:45 A Student Panel from University of Warsaw and the John Felice Rome Center

Topics include:

- Political Surveillance and Privacy
- Disinformation and Micro-targeting
- Political Censorship
- The Impact of Social Media on News Sources, Opinions, and Political Views
- Fragmentation, Manipulation, and Disengagement

Moderators:

- **Mikołaj Rogalewicz** – PhD Student, University of Warsaw; Editor, CyberDefence24
- **Nicola Di Lauro** – Professor of Human Rights, JFRC, Loyola University Chicago

SOCIAL GATHERING FOR STUDENTS 18:00–19:30 All students

from the University of Warsaw and Loyola and others, participating in the symposium are invited and encouraged to attend an informal social gathering at **Kufle i Kapsle ul. Nowogrodzka 25/2**. The event is sponsored by Loyola's John Felice Rome Center (JFRC) and is underwritten by Leonard Slotkowski, a JFRC alumnus.

This event is for students **only**.



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Tuesday, October 14th, 9:30 a.m. – 12:45 p.m.

Theme: Countering Backsliding – Retaining and Restoring Democracy

Panel 4: Safeguarding the Pillars of Democracy: Judiciary, Humanitarian Aid, and Free Elections

9:30–10:15

Dr. Wojciech Wilk – *Humanitarian Aid in Times of Crisis*, Chief Executive Officer, Polish Center for International Aid (PCPM)

10:15–11:00

Interference with elections, the media and civil society – a conversation with Ivan Godarsky and John Kurowski

- **Ivan Godarsky** – Legal and Media Expert, MEMO98, Slovakia
- **John Kurowski** – Conference Chair

11:00–11:15 Break

Panel 5: Democracy in Crisis – Lessons from Around the World

11:15–1:00

- **Prof. Agnieszka Bieńczyk-Missala** – *Democracy's Path in Poland: Polish Transformation and Its Lessons for Europe's Democratic Future*, University of Warsaw
- **Dr. Edit Zgut-Przybylska** – *Informal power: the linchpin of democratic backsliding in Orbán's Hungary*, The Polish Academy of Sciences
- **Bill Mahoney** – *The Erosion of Democracy in the United States: who would have thought?*, Chicago Council on Global Affairs Chairman's Circle and Human Rights Watch Policy Committee

Moderator: Dr. Aleksandra Jarczewska, University of Warsaw

1:00 Closing Remarks – John Kurowski
