

## Concept Note

# Human Rights Cities Against Authoritarianism and Populism

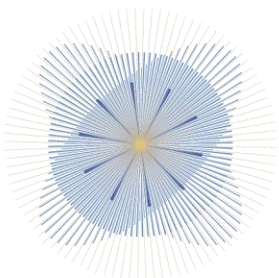
### Background

Human rights cities place the universal ideals of human rights at the core of urban development and put policies and institutions grounded in respect for human rights into practice. Human rights cities have evolved on the basis of diversity and democracy, participation and solidarity. However, in recent years, the spread of authoritarian governance and populist politics around the world has posed serious threats to the values and principles of human rights cities.

Contemporary authoritarian rule restricts civic freedoms and participation through non-democratic forms of governance, while populism fuels division and exclusionary narratives through emotional incitement, thereby eroding the institutional foundations of democracy. The result is a gradual weakening of human rights, democratic governance, and social trust. In particular, the regression of the rights of vulnerable groups, such as migrants, women, youth, and minorities, is deepening. These trends undermine the normative foundations of human rights, built over centuries, and endanger the very existence of democratic institutions and civil society.

The year 2026 marks the 78th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and this year the global human rights community is called upon to articulate a clearer democratic and human rights perspective. This takes place against the reality in which authoritarian rule has intensified and populist incitement deepens social polarization and intergroup hostility.

Against this backdrop, the 16th World Human Rights Cities Forum seeks to diagnose the human rights challenges arising from authoritarianism and populism, and to explore the responsibilities and practical tasks of human rights cities in responding to these challenges. The Forum will discuss ways to build a global framework for cooperation by uniting local governments, international organizations, and civil society worldwide to restore human rights and to reinforce democracy.



## Theme

The theme of the World Human Rights Cities Forum 2026 is “Human Rights Cities Against Authoritarianism and Populism”. This theme addresses the practical tasks of human rights cities in countering the spread of authoritarianism and populism that is undermining democratic institutions, pluralism, and the culture of human rights. It also emphasizes the urgency of renewed international cooperation to defend human rights, promote solidarity, and create democratic resilience. The Forum seeks to identify strategies through which human rights cities, international organizations, and civil society can uphold human rights principles, as well as to explore avenues for solidarity at both local and global levels.

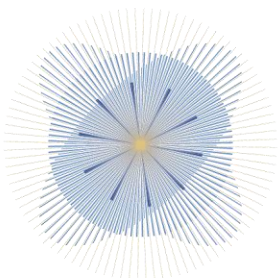
## Main Agenda

**First, the Forum will discuss the spread of authoritarianism and populism and assess the impact on human rights.**

It will examine how authoritarian politics and populism in contemporary societies erode human rights and democratic principles. It will address specific cases such as restrictions on freedom of expression, the increase in discrimination and hate, the shrinking of civic participation, the issue of fake news, and the repression of political opposition. It will analyze the structural factors through which authoritarianism weakens democratic institutions and human rights. The Forum, thereby, will lay the foundation for understanding these emerging threats to human rights.

**Second, the Forum will explore the policies and roles of human rights cities in responding to authoritarianism and populism.**

Human rights cities must offer a model of urban administration that ensures citizen participation and protects human rights within a democratic system. Therefore, institutional mechanisms that protect citizens' rights from authoritarian and populist trends are essential. The Forum will propose concrete policy measures that enable the practice of democracy in everyday life, in areas such as human rights education, civic participation, access to information and transparent administration, and the freedom of the press and media pluralism. The Forum will then seek institutional and practical approaches that establish a culture of human rights.



**Third, the Forum will discuss response strategies for civil society and local communities aimed at restoring and promoting human rights.**

Civil society is central to confronting the influence of authoritarianism and populism, which weakens pluralism. It should explore ways to strengthen solidarity and action for human rights advocacy and to expand public spheres that restore truth and trust. The Forum will examine ways through which civil society can collaborate with local governments to build inclusive local communities that overcome exclusion and hatred by institutionally guaranteeing the participation and voices of socially vulnerable groups, including youth, women, migrants, and persons with disabilities.

**Fourth, the Forum will explore avenues for international cooperation and solidarity among human rights cities to restore democracy and protect human rights.**

The spread of authoritarianism and populism is a global phenomenon that transcends national and regional boundaries. In response, human rights cities must further strengthen frameworks for international solidarity and cooperation. The Forum will examine concrete models of cooperation such as city-to-city exchanges on human rights policies, declarations on human rights protection, cooperative networks, sharing best practices of human rights policy, global civic education programs, and joint initiatives to prevent human rights violations and restore democracy. Further, the Forum will seek collaboration with the United Nations and other international organizations to explore ways to advance human rights governance in order to counter authoritarianism.

