Agenda: Democracy in an Era of "AI Sovereignty"

Virtual Roundtable (Zoom)

December 11, 2025, 11:00 am–12:15 am EST

While "AI sovereignty" has become a global buzzword, the implications for democracy are relatively undercovered. This 75-minute, discussion-based virtual roundtable will provide an opportunity to reflect and hear from a global group of tech and democracy researchers, advocates, and practitioners on how the push for greater government involvement in AI development could impact core democratic principles, from free speech and privacy to self-determination. In addition to assessing risks from autocratic actors, we will consider through a global lens the goals and concerns driving the "sovereign AI" push, and pathways to address these concerns while safeguarding human rights and civic space.

> ****We have set out the following rough agenda and recruited several attendees as session openers in order to keep the conversation focused. However, we want this to be a forum for open idea-sharing and **look forward to active engagement from all our expert participants (that means you!)** throughout the course of the discussion.*

Discussion Timeline:

11:00 am — **Welcome / Introduction**

Kevin Sheives, International Forum for Democratic Studies
Beth Kerley, International Forum for Democratic Studies

11:07 am — **Opening / Brainstorming: What Is AI Sovereignty?**

The phrase "AI sovereignty" can connote a range of efforts up and down the tech stack, with political implications that vary across regime types. Some analysts question whether "sovereign AI" is a realistic ambition for most countries. What do participants see as the key elements of "sovereign AI" (positive or negative) from a democracy perspective?

First comment: Iria Puyosa, Atlantic Council
Mind-mapping exercise (all participants)

11:15 am — **Discussion: Data Risks & Opportunities**

The development of "sovereign AI" creates a new impetus for data localization. In authoritarian settings, however, data

storage in-country may make dissenters more vulnerable to state repression. How can democracy advocates distinguish between justified economic and national-security approaches to data governance, and dangerous authoritarian power grabs?
Opening comment: K.S. Park, Open Net Korea

11:30 am **Discussion: Censorship or Cultural Preservation?**

At the content layer, states are seeking to develop models more suited to local contexts. This ambition reflects genuine concerns, including among digital rights advocates, but also provides a potential entry point for censorship. What kinds of safeguards can help uphold the right to free expression?
Opening comment: Xiao Qiang, *China Digital Times*

11:45 am **Discussion: Sovereign AI and the "Splinternet"**

Government control over certain AI models present greater risks where others are inaccessible. At the same time, from Russia's "sovereign internet" to Geedge Networks' export of China's "Great Firewall" tech, threats to global connectivity are intensifying. Over the coming 3–5 years, are more users likely to begin encountering "sovereign AI" technologies within the boundaries of closed digital ecosystems? How might the combination of these trends impact civic space?
Opening comment: Kian Vesteinsson, Freedom House

12:00 pm **Discussion: Positive Visions for Localized AI**

In partly free settings, what can civil society do to channel state interest in AI in directions that support goals like good governance and democratic accountability? In closed societies, can we find bottom-up approaches to AI that offer their own, democratic vision of self-determination?
Opening Comments: Dan O'Maley, NED; Aubra Anthony, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

12:12 pm **Wrap-up / Conclusion**