

VIRGINIE ROBERT

Foreign Desk Editor at *Les Échos*, Vice President of the European-American Press Club in Paris

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Hello everyone. I am Virginie Robert, I am the Foreign Desk Editor for *Les Echos*, the French business daily and we are going to talk about a very incredible electoral year ahead. To discuss this, I have with me Igor Yurgens from Russia, a man who has been involved in the insurance industry for many years, several associations, and he is also involved in the Russian International Affairs Council. Next to him is Isabelle Lasserre, a journalist like me, who is the Diplomatic Correspondent for the well-known French newspaper, *Le Figaro*. She has been a defense, diplomatic and foreign correspondent and war reporter, so she has done just about everything. She has just written a book about Putin and Macron that is going very well, the book maybe not the relationship. Next to me is Hiroyuki Akita, senior writer for *Nikkei*, who publishes commentaries and columns on foreign affairs and security affairs. He has worked all over the place, in London, Washington and Beijing, and he has been a foreign correspondent so he knows the field very well. Finally, we have Monsieur Gruffat by video link, a banker, who I met in New York when he was working for Citi and he has been involved in a lot of different projects.

Before we start the panel, I would like to share a study with you that came out yesterday, which was published by International Idea, an inter-governmental group based in Sweden that monitors the state of democracy. The findings are really appalling because it shows that in 2022 the world has entered the longest democratic recession every observed, which means that for the sixth consecutive year democratic values are losing ground everywhere. I mean everywhere, in Europe, the Americas, India and Russia. Declines have occurred in the very foundations of democracy revealing weaknesses in the electoral processes, in the ability of legislators to act as checks on executive overreach and also difficultly for people in accessing the institutions of justice. For instance, you have countries like Tunisia, Afghanistan, Byelorussia, Nicaragua and Myanmar that showed great regression last year. This institutional weakness is confounded by continuing declines in core democratic rights including freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly and freedom of the press. Of course, Europe is not immune because according to the report the rule of law has weakened and it will not surprise many of you but in Hungary and Austria, where freedom of expression falters, access to justice is more difficult in the UK as well as France, where the freedom of assembly is also fading. Last year many factors were deteriorating in Poland. The recent election won by the opposition might pave the way for improvement. It is not an overstatement to say that globally democracy now faces pressure everywhere with authoritarian regimes tightening their grip and too many elected leaders adopting authoritarian tactics to claim control. Meanwhile, you have misinformation campaigns, political polarization and rising inequality that erode people's trust in democracy. You will probably agree with me that it is of paramount importance that democracies show their resilience, not all political regions are equal and next year's elections will indeed show if the democratic process is able to rebound.