

Keynote: Cross-Border Democracy Depends on Encounter and Participation

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Editorial note: This version was corrected and edited on the basis of an automatically generated transcript. Obvious recognition errors were reconstructed from context; technical interruptions, repetitions and purely organisational remarks were removed. The substance of the contributions has been preserved.

Dear friends, near and far, as we say in German.

Your meeting is part of the International Danube Festival. This cultural festival has a strong tradition and opens a window onto film, music, art, fashion, food and the extraordinary cultural richness of the Danube region.

Your event within this wonderful setting is something very special. Its title is “Democracy Needs All of Us”. The future of a transnational European democracy can only be built if ordinary citizens identify with it from the bottom up, learn about one another and respect the very different life experiences of others.

The experiences of young and middle-aged people in western or eastern Germany are not the same as those of people in the Western Balkans, Hungary, Ukraine or Moldova. That is precisely why this meeting is so valuable. To my knowledge, there are very few events that connect so many people from such different parts of the Danube region.

Around 150 citizens are coming together here: people from regions facing political pressure, from countries seeking to join the European Union, and from areas affected by war. They meet one another as people, not merely as representatives of institutions.

You are also working with new formats, similar to those we developed in Baden-Württemberg to foster citizen participation and a “politics of being heard”. I am particularly excited by the intergenerational tandem project initiated by Carmen Stadelhofer, which brings older people in Germany together with young people in Ukraine and other countries, including the Western Balkans.

This format appears to offer a great deal to both generations. It is not about one side teaching the other. It is about learning from one another. At its heart are mutual respect and an awareness of the other person’s circumstances.

For many years, an important part of the Danube Networkers’ work has been the combination of digital and face-to-face encounters. You work online and through video conferences – as I am doing today because I cannot attend in person due to my husband’s illness. At the same time, you find ways to meet physically despite very limited budgets.

This is not a major international conference at which thousands of experts travel with generous budgets and large expense accounts. Many of you have to organise these journeys with very modest resources, yet you still invest your time, energy and personal commitment. That makes this work especially valuable.

Such encounters provide an essential foundation for resisting authoritarian tendencies and the politics of hatred. Old resentments can flare up again at any moment, in Germany as well as in the Balkans. We can see

how historical conflicts and hostile narratives may be revived, and social media can intensify these developments.

The formats you are using at this conference are therefore indispensable. We should continue this work, seek more support and speak with European institutions about how these connections can be strengthened.

I would like to thank everyone at ILEU and throughout the Danube Networkers for the many years of experience that have gone into this work. A network like this does not appear overnight. It is built through many years of learning, experimenting and learning again.

I wish you a productive and rewarding day. Enrich yourselves, your friends and, through your work, the whole European community.

Thank you for inviting me.