

Keynote: Democracy and Participation for All Generations

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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.

Good morning. Today I would like to speak about democracy and participation for all generations. This is an essential part of our motto, “Democracy Needs All of Us”. I will address three topics: first, the crisis of democracy; second, the formal structures needed to protect democratic government; and third, democratic education and democracy as a lived practice, as an impulse for our panel discussions and workshops.

At the end of the twentieth century, many people believed that an age of democracy had begun. With the supposed “end of history”, liberalism and freedom seemed to be becoming the norm everywhere. There was a vision of a common European house. Western and Eastern Europe moved closer together, Germany celebrated reunification, and the European Union expanded. The creation of the Danube Networkers and our gathering here today are also products of that period.

Since 2014, and with complete clarity since 2022, we have known that war has returned to Europe and that democracy is in crisis. Our age is characterised by profound transformations and social change.

One example is demographic change: the number of older people is rising while the number of younger people is falling. This places pressure on social-security systems and intensifies shortages of skilled workers. These developments are often framed as a conflict between generations.

Another challenge is climate change and the associated fear for the future. This concern affects not only young people but many older people as well. We must also consider digitalisation, social media and artificial intelligence. They create major opportunities for democracy and participation, as we can see today in the use of live translation. At the same time, they carry risks of marginalisation and exclusion for older people, people with low incomes and anyone who cannot use digital applications.

Digitalisation can also reinforce social bubbles. People increasingly communicate only with others who think as they do. Artificial intelligence may intensify this problem, and we do not yet know what its long-term consequences will be.

Social inequality is also increasing. There are more extremely wealthy people and more people living in poverty. Inequality concerns not only age, but also gender, background and other dimensions of diversity. When disadvantages intersect, they reinforce one another.

These developments contribute to emotional polarisation, social division and a loss of trust in other people, the state and democratic systems. Populists and demagogues gain influence. We must therefore ask: how can trust in our societies be restored?

Issues such as climate, intergenerational relations, migration and refugees are highly polarised in public debate. Yet when people are asked in more detail about their views, a broader social consensus often emerges than public and media debates suggest. Part of the polarisation is therefore amplified or “virtual”. At

the same time, we must not underestimate how widespread far-right and anti-democratic attitudes are. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation's "Mitte Study" demonstrates this in Germany, and I believe it is a problem across Europe.

Peace and democracy are under pressure from within and from outside. What do we need in order to protect democracy? Democracy is, first of all, a form of government and requires reliable formal structures. Democracy derives from the people. The well-known formula is government of the people, by the people and for the people.

Its fundamental principles include the separation and limitation of powers, the rule of law, free elections and voting, direct and representative forms of participation, pluralism, freedom of expression and diversity. Freedom of the media and a public sphere in which arguments can be exchanged openly are particularly important.

Yet this public sphere is undergoing profound structural change. Polarisation, fragmented perceptions and growing mistrust of the media are intensified by social networks and the internet. At the same time, we need effective protection of minorities. Freedom must always include the freedom of those who think differently.

Formal structures alone are not enough. We need democratic and political education, and democracy must be lived in everyday life. This conference and the Danube Networkers are good examples. Political education must not be limited to schools; it is needed everywhere and at every age.

Democratic education must not manipulate people or become propaganda. It must recognise that people have different interests and perspectives and take those differences seriously. It must enable everyone to participate so that people are included and feel that they belong.

We should give new meaning to the old call to "dare more democracy". Democracy must be experienced in families, schools, neighbourhoods, associations and many other places in everyday life. It needs so-called third places: the local pub as well as voluntary organisations, cultural institutions, community centres and civil-society initiatives.

Learning democracy and living it in everyday life also involves moral courage: standing up for others even when there is no personal benefit, or when doing so may cause difficulties. We must counter polarisation and the division of our societies. To achieve this, we need compelling narratives about tolerance, diversity, the protection of minorities and solidarity in diverse societies.

We need a culture of debate that allows open and critical thinking. Democracy and participation have no age limits. Younger and older people must learn with and from one another. We must create spaces where people can listen and speak, reduce inequalities, act in solidarity and empower one another.

Such experiences strengthen self-efficacy – the conviction that we can shape our own lives and our shared democracy. Civil-society organisations need greater support, resources and public funding to make this possible.

Democracy needs all of us. This means democracy and participation for all people, engagement by all people, and a democratic society that serves all people.

Thank you very much.