



Europe's democracy problem: reflections on strengthening democracy in Europe

IDEAS UP FOR GRABS



Defeating the pigeon's gambit

The search for solutions that can strengthen democracy at a time when Europe's political systems are shaken by yet another crisis – in the shape of soaring prices triggered by Russian's war on Ukraine – formed the focus of a European Young Leaders' (EYL40) brainstorming session on 28 October 2022 at Friends of Europe's TownHall Europe centre in Brussels.

With eurozone inflation topping 10%, participants warned that the surging cost of energy and other staples were increasing the danger that extremists could make further electoral gains, fuelled by voter disillusionment, unless mainstream politicians can find ways to counter the populists' simplistic but effective messaging.

About the European Young Leaders programme (EYL40) Programme

Celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2022, the European Young Leader (EYL40) programme represents an alternative leadership for an inspiring Europe. Each year, the programme selects a new class of reputed leaders under the age of 40 from a wide range of backgrounds who represent an alternative infrastructure of leadership, a new generation of leaders able to inspire action and generate change and play an essential role in helping reconnect people with politics.

"What we are seeing in different parts of Europe is that people who are feeling disgruntled and not really reflected in the mainstream, are making different choices. There is something wrong with the nature of politics, whether it is left or right, and the centre seems to be missing," noted **Dharmendra Kanani**, Chief Operating Officer and Chief Spokesperson of Friends of Europe

Emotion can be the key. While mainstream politicians can present logical and rational arguments for advancing progress, they lack the raw 'emotional' appeal of populist identity politics. "Talking to right-wing populists is like playing chess with pigeons: even if you are perfect at playing chess, they finally scatter the pieces, shit on the board and fly around the crowd," said **Ece Temelkuran**, award-winning Turkish novelist, political commentator and author of 'How to Lose a Country: The 7 Steps from Democracy to Dictatorship'. "If you decide to participate in today's politics, you'll feel you are playing chess with a pigeon."

To citizens worrying how to heat their homes or place food on their family table this winter, rational political arguments can look cynical, detached and cold-hearted, Temelkuran argued. "Democracy today does not create any emotions, and fascism today is all about emotions," she contended. "There is no programme – nada, nothing – it's all about emotions. They are talking to the fear, they are talking to the pride, they are talking to the frustration [...] if we want to do anything today in politics, we have to talk about the politics of emotion." Established parties need to focus on those emotions and on citizens' heartfelt concerns to make a greater effort to

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re-engage with the public. Persuading moderately minded citizens to participate in politics by joining parties or engaging in activism is also key to bolstering democracy. "We have a participation problem. We cannot complain that parties don't look like us, if we are not in those parties," noted **Ciarán Devane**, Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Director of the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University and Trustee of Friends of Europe.

In particular, Temelkuran added, more effort is needed to attract talented young people back into politics, reversing a trend that has seen the brightest minds head off into the business world since the 1980s. She pointed to the current female-led protests in Iran and the constitutional revision

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process in Chile as examples of how emotional political engagement can drive positive change.

Ways to ‘re-politicise’ citizens at a European level so that they become more engaged in politics also formed the basis of a debate led by **Alberto Alemanno**, Jean Monnet Professor in EU Law at HEC Paris, Founder of The Good Lobby and 2014 EYL40. His ideas included raising public awareness of the instruments already available for citizens to influence policy at the European level, such as the European Citizens’ Initiative, appeals to the European Ombudsman, citizens’ assemblies or working with civil society.

Alemanno also called for changes in European Parliament election procedures so that a proportion of the members are elected from a common European list, rather than holding the

vote on a purely national level. That would be a major step towards creating shared European politics in line with the growing economic, cultural and interpersonal ties across national borders within the EU.

“Society is becoming much more European [...] the political system is not capable of keeping up with the Europeanisation that is occurring in society,” Alemanno noted. “Europe [...] needs more politics, needs a common European political space.” Contributors saw disturbing parallels between today’s far-right politics and the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 30s. “We think that we’re in the foothills of fascism,” cautioned Devane. “It might appear in a different way; it might not look like it did in the early part of 20th century, but we’re certainly on the spectrum.”

Some, however, warned against applying the ‘fascist’ label to nationalist parties currently vying for power in many European countries. Rather than demonising the far right with such terms, they contended that it would be more productive to ‘respectfully disagree’ with their policies and use constructive arguments to win over those tempted to vote for them. Others disagreed, cautioning that parts of the far right had adopted clear anti-democratic positions, losing any legitimate role in a democratic debate. It was time, therefore, ‘to call it out for what it is’.

There were also differences over whether to take a more localised approach to reviving democracy or use a wider approach. One side argued for a focus on rebuilding community activism on a street-by-street, neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood basis; the other insisted many current problems stem from spending ‘too long looking at our own backyard’ while ignoring big-picture problems afflicting society.

The EYL40 programme is a unique initiative bringing together young people who are setting the pace in fields ranging from politics and the arts, to technology and civil society. The October meeting will feed into wider, pan-European and multi-stakeholder efforts to promote positive politics from all sides in the run up to the 2024 European Parliament elections and define the basis of a Renewed Social Contract for the 21st century.

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Ideas up for grabs to strengthen democracy

On the basis of the democracy roundtable and discussions, the EYL40 workshopped a series of ideas to jumpstart renewed democratic engagement. These are easily implementable ideas and open to all who share a will to re-engage with those who have lost trust in their leaders and what they can do for them.



1 Meet your neighbours!

Cities have increasingly become spaces where individuals live in a bubble and forget the benefits of collective living and the power of collective endeavours. **Organise or join a small-scale neighbourhood project**, be it advocating for local bike lanes, safer zebra-crossings or a shared garden initiative.

2 Go back to your school!

Education is crucial, but it is all the more powerful when coupled with inspiration. **Revisit your primary or secondary school and speak to students.** Reinvest what was once invested into you and inspire the new generations to get involved with Europe, for good.

3 Get involved and join a citizens' assembly!

Citizens' assembly initiatives are useful tools for boosting democracy, complementing traditional representative processes and putting the public at the centre of decision-making. **Attend a citizens' assembly to engage directly with the local decision-making process** and issues that affect citizens directly.

4 Help a local organisation!

Your neighbourhood, city or country faces at least one problem that you're passionate about. **Join the cause through a petition, a meeting or even funding.**

5 Leverage the power of social media!

Social media can amplify negative emotions and dubious information, but it is also a powerful way to speak with your followers and engage with communities. **Leverage the power of social media by being open about day-to-day issues and sharing good news to infuse positivity into the general narrative around what is possible in Europe.**