

Is there hope? The active citizens of the V4

research introduction and roundtable discussion on active citizenship, the actualities of citizens' participation in the framework of the event series Festival of Democracy 2017 organised by Forum 2000 in cooperation with the Czech Centre, STEM and the Visegrad Fund

Participants

- **László Ágoston** – Musician, the head of Moltopera, music manager, marketing adviser and blogger
- **Krisztián Kormos** – a representative of the Independent Student Parliament
- **Domonkos Sík** – associate professor, ELTE TáTK
- **Andrea Szabó** – research fellow, MTA TK PTI
- **Sára Varga** – history professor, member of the Board of Trustees of Közös Halmaz Foundation
- The research was introduced and the discussion was moderated by: **Veszna Wessenauer**, Political Capital

In her presentation Veszna Wessenauer introduced the most important conclusions of the study exploring how respondents view active citizenship in the Visegrád Group, what the motivations for it are in the 16-65 age group, and how active citizenship may be defined in these countries.

Individuals who believe things are heading in the wrong direction are in the majority by a wide margin in all four countries, but the willingness to act seems to be lacking. Apathy is a common phenomenon: more than half of the respondents agree it does not worth it to be involved in politics because “one might easily find oneself in a bind”. At the same time, the decisive majority say they are interested in politics – Andrea Szabó actually voiced her surprise because all results of this study match surveys she knows of except for this point.

For Domonkos Sík the most surprising result was the high frequency of the “European Union” and “democracy” coming up as answers to open-ended questions, but he added that it is unknown what respondents actually think about these milestones.

Sára Varga and Krisztián Kormos pointed out that there is an enormous gap between “being interested in something” and the “willingness to act”; which in fact indicates there is breeding ground for encouraging active citizenship, it is the wall of hopelessness that needs to be broken through.

László Ágoston discussed the broadening of the phrase “politics”: he believes nowadays nobody who states something publicly can avoid that statement being framed in a political context. He himself never wanted to be involved in politics, but he quickly realised no matter what he stands up for will have a connection to politics, and there will be people who define themselves in opposition to it.

At that point the debate had already slightly drifted away from the research and put the issue of active citizenship in broader context. Andrea Szabó emphasised the family's socialising function: she thinks the role of schools is important, but if students do not bring the receptivity for activity from home they will rarely, if ever, become active citizens. Everyone agreed that results can only be achieved in the long-term, but for this the encouragement of incumbent governments is needed instead of their efforts to hinder this process; the lack of this encouragement (partly) explains the failure of the past 30 years in this aspect.

According to Szabó, the keys to Jobbik’s success among the youth are that it provides them with an enjoyable community experience, the “subculture” underpinning the party and the well-told story. Kormos believes radicalism is why the party is attractive: this is the age group of rebels that believes the only party offering an alternative capable of driving change is Jobbik, and it is the party that speaks their language.

Ágoston and Sík started a debate on whether we are “ready” to practice democracy. Ágoston based his argument that democracy does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes on self-destructive decisions such as Brexit. He believes that if five people are speeding towards an abyss in a car and only two say the driver should hit the break the result might be tragic. Sík said this simplified example does not illustrate how democracy works in practice, which is a constant learning process, and it is in fact participation that creates an opportunity for development – and, additionally, every alternative to democratic decision-making have been proven to lead to worse outcomes. Kormos believes education is the answer: education must be as democratic as possible to allow students to leave schools as citizens knowing their rights and obligations.

Varga, a practicing schoolteacher, did not leave any illusions that the educational system prepares teachers for educating students on democracy: the system continues to train researchers and not educators. Children have no idea what their own rights are. Szabó referred to studies conducted in the US to add that the main deciding factor in terms of students’ socialisation and practicing democratic rights is the school environment.

Ágoston generated intense debate when he questioned why masses who do not wish to be involved in public affairs should be encouraged to deal with something they do not wish to. The idea of restricting universal suffrage also came up, which Sík and Varga firmly objected to.

Research partners:

- STEM (CZ)
- Institute for Public Affairs (SK)
- Institute for Public Affairs (PL)
- Political Capital (HU)