



Do I have a say? – a roundtable about different perspectives on active citizenship and civic participation in Hungary

What does it mean to be an active citizen, how could politics and civil society promote this attitude? This is what András Radnóti asked Veszna Wessenauer (Political Capital), Tessza Udvarhelyi (Közélet Iskolája), Andrea Szabó (MTA TK) and Rita Galambos about on Momentum Movement's Nyitás Festival.

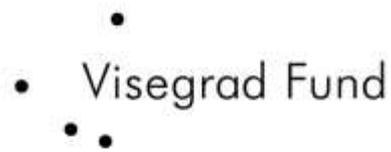
The definition of active citizenship can be approached from different directions. Thus, Andrea Szabó claimed an active citizen is someone who does something for the public, while Tessza Udvarhelyi would prefer using the 'political being' characterisation. Every participant agreed that this attitude can primarily be learned through personal experiences, which consist of socialisation in the family as much as formal education – or, at least, it should. Active citizens are always aware of their rights and duties, they always know when and what they should stand up for, even if they have to take to the streets – emphasised Andrea Szabó. She believes this is a serious dividing line between Western and Eastern European youths, as this is almost natural for the former group, while the latter one is still fighting to beat the disposition that passivity is the accepted and traditional norm.

The participants identified the fact that public education does not fulfil its task to form the youths' democratic habits as a serious problem. The lack of political will is the main obstacle in this regard. One of the main reason for this is that not a single government considered raising aware, prepared and actually active citizens to be important enough. A generation grown up with some sort of awareness would pose a threat to the reigning government. Although this is not a short-term risk, politics prefers not to take a chance. This is a mistake also because – as Veszna Wessenauer explained – the far right made engaging in public affairs trendy in some ways, albeit not along the lines of the desired system of norms. Jobbik did this through a long, persistent process by creating opportunities for community-building and belonging to a community, helping them find a way to young people, mostly in the countryside. This so far has only been realised in such an "institutional" form as a part of the far-right subculture. Tessza Udvarhelyi also believes that permanent results may only be achieved by long-term processes, and support for social movements, organisations in the wider society is a prerequisite of this.

Rita Galambos claims that besides long-term plans, ad hoc activity must not be underestimated, which does have the capability to entice the youth, for example the demonstrations in support of CEU and civil society organisations, and the loose alliances forged by these events. According to her, the significance of these is that young people can see an example of meaningful advocacy even if a certain event also carries risks.

Continuing this thought, Andrea Szabó answered whether the youth can only be mobilised against something. Based on her studies, she said young people – more accurately, university students – mainly take steps against events affecting their belly, e.g., if the food in the canteen is expensive or not good enough or their grants are too low. However, a change can be observed since 2010, their rights and grievances now also motivate them to take action.

The last block explored the topic of political participation, regarding what Veszna Wessenauer said that it cannot be separated from active citizenship, no matter if its about planting trees or activity aimed at changing the government. At the same time, it is a serious concern that political participation is demonised, not a part of our system of norms, often we look at it with fear – said Rita Galambos.



Tessza Udvarhelyi, partly reinforcing the above, warned that there is a lack of belief in that our world can be different than the one we live in and got used to. Andrea Szabó claims participation is always bound by the community – no matter if it is only a small circle of friends – because this experience, the community experience is why we attend demonstrations, and the tighter the community, the more likely participation is. If the youth feel a place exists where there is party, community and goals to fight for, and not orders issued by a leader but something coming from the grassroots for which one can fight both alone and together, they will take steps.