



MAKING POLITICS RELEVANT AGAIN

TO BRAINSTORM ON WAYS TO BOOST DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Getting citizens more engaged in the democratic process is a key question facing Europe as it prepares for the 2019 elections to the European Parliament.

In the run up to that vote, Friends of Europe will be inviting the public to regular sessions to gauge the mood and widen debate on what politicians should be doing to re-connect with voters.

At the first major event for this year's European Young Leaders programme, around 100 Warsaw citizens joined 50 past-and-present Young Leaders at their seminar in the Polish capital.

Their goal: to brainstorm on ways to boost democratic engagement and thrash out concrete proposals that Friends of Europe can take forward to European decision-makers before next year's election.

"Wherever we go now, we want to bring people in cities directly into the discussion with us on subjects that matter," [Dharmendra Kanani](#), Friends of Europe's Director of Strategy told the assembled Varsovians.

"We felt it was really important this year to think through what citizens want," he added. "Many on the ground feel very, very distant about the decisions that are made about them and there's a sense of cynicism."

The open sessions followed an EU-wide poll of citizens conducted through Friends of Europe's online platform, Debating Europe, in the weeks leading up to the seminar.

The recommendations produced by the Warsaw session will be fed back into a series of online debates with Europe's movers and shakers, to be hosted by Friends of Europe's 3.4 million-strong Debating Europe citizens' platform.

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To get the ball rolling in Warsaw, a snap poll asked participants three pointed questions on political involvement:

1. Do you think your vote matters?
2. Do you believe your political representatives will follow through their promises?
3. Would you want to be involved in decision making at local, national and European level?

In response, **88 % of the Warsaw citizens and European Young Leaders said they believe their vote matters, but 79 % did not expect politicians to follow through on election promises. All but 4 % said they want to be more involved in decision making at local, national and European level.** This feedback was consistent with the results of the Debating Europe poll.

“Let young people do politics as you should do it in the 21st Century”

Participants were also asked to name, in one word, what they felt is needed in politics. Answers included: involvement, trust, sincerity, solidarity, transparency and deliberation.

Opening the debate, two of the 2018 European Young Leaders shared their experiences and ideas about engaging citizens in politics and civil society.

“People are engaged as citizens, but they don’t want to be engaged as politicians,” acknowledged [Sammy Mahdi](#), Chairman of the youth wing of the Christian Democratic and Flemish (CD&V) party in Belgium. In Flanders, he explained, trust in politicians is among the lowest in Europe, falling below 10 %.

Recalling less-than-successful efforts of his party to attract young people with spaghetti evenings in a local church hall, Mahdi said political movements have to up their game. They need to modernise their outreach to younger voters; use direct, everyday language; and put trust in voters – if they want voters to trust them in return.

“Let young people do politics as you should do it in the 21st Century,” he said. “People have their social and economic problems, and you need to talk with them at a level where they feel trusted.”

[Stefania Kapronczay](#), Executive Director of the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, argued for mainstream politicians and civil society to address the root causes of voter dissatisfaction, which fuels support for authoritarian and populist alternatives.



“There are fears in our society, there are very legitimate fears and when responding to populist politics we shouldn’t lose sight of those fears,” she said.

As an example, Kapronczay mentioned how poor Roma families in Hungary were concerned social support could be diverted from them to incoming refugees.

“Sometimes those fears come from genuine experience and we shouldn’t say that what they are saying is racist and so on, but try to go to the bottom of it and try to understand why it resonates with so many people in our countries,” she said.

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The cross-section of Warsaw citizens taking part in the debate included civil servants, pensioners, civil society activists, students and others. Their comments confirmed Kapronczay’s assertion that citizens in central Europe have high levels of disillusionment with their politicians.

“Parties got very rigid, un-transparent and unresponsive to local needs,” said one Warsaw citizen. “They are pursuing other interests, they are not pursuing citizens’ interests.”

“Young people don’t want to get into politics,” said Monica, another Varsovian. “There is a barrier of older people that govern and they don’t want to count on the votes of young people.”

The EYL participants and Warsaw citizens then broke into small groups to draft recommendations on how to improve the participation of citizens in European democracies.

Their suggestions included:

- **stimulating engagement at early age within the education system;**
- **participatory budgets, where citizens can choose where public funds are spent;**
- **getting politicians to communicate in easily understood language;**
- **improving use of social media tools and digital technology;**
- **increased guidance for citizens on how to lobby politicians;**
- **better watchdog mechanisms to ensure day-to-day accountability.**

These will be among the ideas that Friends of Europe will feed into its debates with politicians, aiming to make a difference ahead of the European Parliament vote set for the spring of 2019, as well as feeding into Debating Europe’s #Me&EU campaign, and Friends of Europe’s “A Conversation With” series of interviews with Juncker’s College of European Commissioners.



Led by Friends of Europe, each year the European Young Leaders (EYL40) programme brings together talented, established leaders, aged 40 and under, who have made their mark in a wide range of fields such as politics, science, business, media, NGOs, the arts and civil society. You can find more information about the programme in the EYL40 overview. The programme was originally conceived with EuropaNova. The 2018 spring seminar was hosted in Warsaw, Poland.

