Direct, digital, dynamic – What does our democracy need today?

Appeal: What an “update” for a “smart” democracy could look like
Report: How “rebel cities” are developing solutions to global challenges
Interview: “From a democratic perspective, it is indefensible to exclude children from voting and elections”
A threat to democracy?

“We are a community that wants to think about China – from within China”

Aktivism in the Trump era

“From living room demonstrations to Tinder: new protest forms in the USA, by Berenike Schott”
Dear readers!

What happened to the dream of democracy? Populism and isolation are on the rise, while citizens continue to lose trust in the "rule of the people". The concept of democracy is challenged to prove its robustness and adaptive capacity. But what could a model for the future look like? Which innovations and ideas could strengthen democracy, overcome its flaws and make it attractive again? These are the questions being raised in 2017 – not only within nefia, the Network for International Affairs, but also in this issue of *ad hoc international*.

"The digitalisation of our society means a break with tradition, calling for an update of democracy", writes Maximilian Stern in his plea for a "smart" democracy. Such a "smart" democracy must be lived as a vivid form of government, adapting itself to the needs of its citizens. In this sense, it is time to "create a virtual village where we meet and discuss, elaborate our ideas and decide where to go as a society."

Implementing this vision also entails new risks for democracy, as Niklas Kossow discusses in his piece on social media. He underlines the fact that not only must democratic institutions and processes find an intelligent way to address new digital possibilities, but that citizens must also be trained in how to navigate the new information and communication landscape. Johanna Havemann describes how “virtual town squares” could look in her article, presenting new formats developed within the context of the Global Innovation Gathering.

Interdisciplinary and interactive brainstorming formats play an important role in the search for a new identity in our seemingly old-fashioned democracies. In this regard, Florian Egli reports on how the Swiss grassroots think tank foraus empowered hundreds of people to contribute to a new vision for Switzerland as a country of migration and opportunities.

Yorck von Korff describes popular assemblies in Ireland, New York and New Orleans whose members are chosen through random selection and which deal with fundamental political issues. Cornelius Adebahr reflects upon a dialogue series initiated by the German Foreign Office, in which 2,000 participants from all over the country discussed Europe’s future.

Democracy can only survive if its values, such as the acceptance of diverse opinions, are actively lived. For this reason, we dedicate two articles to projects facilitating dialogue between different social groups. Likki-Lee Pitzen’s article advocates for intra-German student exchange programmes, while Sarah Bidoli’s contribution contemplates how mentoring programmes in the Berlin neighbourhood of Neukölln promote democracy. These articles highlight social groups who will be forced to deal with the consequences of today’s policies, yet often finds themselves disadvantaged in the political process: namely, children and youth. We continue the conversation about these groups’ role in society in our interview with Thomas Handschin, a board member of the Swiss Children’s Lobby. Handschin claims that it is harmful to democracies to exclude minors from elections.

This edition of *ad hoc international* proves: democracy yearns to be lived between and outside of election cycles and formal party politics. Democracy will adapt to the needs of the citizens it serves, and is as diverse as the people who keep it alive. We are excited to present an issue highlighting people who shape their futures through peaceful exchange, creativity and innovation. These are the people who rapidly disseminate successful models of coexistence, burst filter bubbles and stir up politics – authentically and in a way that puts the interests of people first. Enjoy!

Waleria Schüle

Julia Harrer

Please send us your comments and feedback: redaktion@adhoc-international.org, or visit www.facebook.com/adhocinternational.
Designing the state of the future – a plea for “smart” democracy

by Maximilian Stern

The digitalisation of our society marks a turning point that also calls for an update to our democracy – not only because our lives are changing, but also because digitalisation already has a direct impact on how we organise politics. New forms of political participation have emerged relying on online cooperation and coordination, such as the “Net Party” in Argentina. Through social media and software like the nation-builder platform, we can target large groups of people in a purposeful way, mobilising them very quickly. By using holograms, candidates can interact with voters face-to-face in even the most remote parts of the country.

However, these innovations in political engagement also have the potential to throw our current political system off-balance. New forms of communication may in turn promote filter bubbles which impose different rhetorical frameworks on our political discourse. Traditional media continue to struggle with advertising’s migration onto the Internet, and are no longer capable of fulfilling the role of the fourth estate. In addition, hackers – possibly on behalf of other states – endanger the security of elections and votes, and threaten to deprive the system of legitimacy.

Therefore, rather than just regulate new technologies, the state must adopt and integrate them into the democratic system and its political mechanics. It must actively contribute to debates, even on social media, and should comment, discuss and shape new laws with tools like screendoor. It has to increase efficiency and effectiveness in law making and the management of government by evaluating the potential advantages of blockchain and artificial intelligence technologies. Finally, it must guarantee the necessary cyber security and accountability for government to function, such as through the development of official electronic identities.

In our digital era, democracy needs an update. We need a “smart” democracy – a democracy that uses new decision-making technologies and accounts for digitalisation’s impact on our changing society.

When deciding the future of our community and the ways in which we live together, every one of us deserves a voice. In a democracy, the legitimacy of this voice is symbolised by the ballot cast at the polling station. Dropping a piece of paper into a scaled urn, voting for deputies or even on specific legislation in a popular referendum – the methods appear self-evident and without alternative.

We tend to ignore the continuously-evolving mechanisms and related technologies of political participation, yet history reveals plenty of instances of political innovation: the notion that citizens could use their vote to elect delegates to represent their interests in parliament was an innovation, as was the tool of the ballot itself. The installation of a lower chamber, as is found in many modern parliaments, was a political innovation designed to protect minorities. Switzerland’s popular referendums and system of cantonal rule were innovations to ensure social inclusion and protect society from powerful economic interests. These adjustments were introduced to incorporate new social norms emerging alongside technological developments. New technologies were more often than not at the heart of these political adjustments, such as electronic parliamentary voting systems or comprehensive online publication of laws and draft laws.

It is precisely this capacity for adaptation that is ultimately democracy’s greatest strength. It is a living and malleable form of government capable of accommodating the changing needs of its citizens. Today, these needs are indeed changing very rapidly. We have reached a point where digitalisation has a profound impact on how we live and interact together. Our professional lives are characterised by flexibility and volatility; any modern career requires permanent learning. The information age has changed our professional and our private environment in countless ways – we enjoy access to much more knowledge, content and data than ever before. We travel more often and further, live longer and are increasingly tightly connected. At the same time, we have new and unprecedented opportunities for communication through social networks, where we can organise, observe, and analyse together.
However, it would be mistaken to view democracy’s digitalisation exclusively as the logical consequence of developments in information technology. Rather, it is also a means for the pursuit of enhanced legitimacy. Through the use of these new tools, we are now able to interact with a great many more people, absorbing, analysing and processing their ideas. We have the opportunity to create a virtual village where we meet and discuss, elaborate our ideas and decide where to go as a society.

Should the state fail to provide such a virtual space (despite having the means), it would be depriving its citizens of a basic political right.

In conceptualising this digital democracy, it will be crucial to strike balances: acceleration and agility also raise the importance of brakes. Democracy will always require periods of reflection and contemplation, while inclusion also requires the ability to participate. To counteract the digital divide, new and old minorities must be integrated and protected. Furthermore, we must ensure that the democratic process can be checked at any time, even “manually” if necessary.

In the new digital democratic system, a harness of accountability, security, transparency, inclusion and the protection of minorities is called for. Only then can it be a “smart” digital democracy.

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“It is time to integrate civic participation and lottery procedures into democracy”

by Yorck von Korff

The current state of our democracies is cause for concern. Donald Trump’s victory and the Brexit vote show that our political system – founded on the basis of votes and referendums – is capable of producing results which only benefit a few people (Brexit), or even very few people (Trump). Modern procedures for civic participation may remedy this situation.

In the 2016 Austrian presidential election, almost half of the vote went to the right-populist FPÖ’s candidate, Norbert Hofer; Marine Le Pen of the Front National won 33.9 percent of the vote during the French presidential election in May 2017. Europe’s nationalist parties are gaining influence, while almost half of people interviewed for the Eurobarometer survey in March 2017 indicated being “not satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU.” This is one of the reasons why historian David van Reybrouck declares himself Against Elections, as reads the title of his recent book. My counter-proposal? Let’s try casting lots!

From Ancient Greece up until the French Revolution, the notion of democracy was only applied to cases where citizens were directly involved in decision-making process, i.e. presenting proposals and voting on them. Citizens were not elected but appointed by the drawing of lots. The procedure of casting lots guaranteed active participation by a large number of people, reduced corruption, and kept citizens well-informed. Although legitimate and efficient, Athenian democracy was not perfect: women could not vote, a right they continued to be denied long after the shift to representative democracy.

Ireland has drawn lots to assign citizens to discussions and votes on fundamental political questions since 2012.

Today, many concepts allow citizens to participate in politics. Ireland has drawn lots to assign citizens to discussions and votes on fundamental political questions since 2012. It is then up to the parliament to vote on the issue and perhaps even pave the way for a referendum, as was the case with changes to the country’s abortion laws. Citizen assemblies have discussed several topics in Ireland: should the president’s term of office be prolonged? How to increase the number of women in politics? Should Ireland introduce same-sex marriage? The results of these votes and ensuing referendums are often unambiguous, serving as a relatively clear indicator of social trends – and because they come from the people, their legitimacy is beyond question.

→ Drawing lots – this can be done digitally or, traditionally, by hand.
Citizen assemblies and similar procedures such as citizen juries now exist in other countries and on different political levels. New York City gathered 4,300 citizens to plan the redesigning of Lower Manhattan after the 9/11 terror attacks. New Orleans took a similar approach following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Concepts like these are not yet part of the established system, and a popular belief persists among citizens and politicians that citizen assemblies are incompetent or unrepresentative – however, the opposite appears to be true.

Individuals cast by lot take their duty very seriously, raising few if any concerns of corruption.

Through consultation with experts, they learn about the relevant issues quickly and obtain high levels of knowledge and competence on the particular topic. Furthermore, these groups are often much more representative in terms of profession, gender and age than national parliaments.

Citizen assemblies are free from parliamentary or legislative gridlock. Politicians in a party system find themselves divided into opposing blocs, with little to no room for compromise – particularly during election campaigns. In participative formats, on the other hand, communication is supported by professional moderators who foster empathy and a positive atmosphere. Representative democracy lacks such things. It is time to integrate civic participation and lottery procedures on a local, national and European level. Ireland shows us that it can work.

"I think, therefore, I don't vote." Can lottery procedures counteract popular disenchantment with politics?

Yorck von Korff, a 1995/96 fellow, is a facilitator, mediator and consultant for participatory processes. He has worked in international development, ecosystem management, and intra-organizational change. He is based in Montpellier, France. Yorck.von-korff@flow-ing.fr (www.flow-ing.fr)
Social media: A threat to democracy?

by Niklas Kossow

Hate speech, fake news, manipulative campaigns – our media landscape has changed fundamentally in recent years, and our democracy has changed with it. Nevertheless, we should not see ourselves as victims of social media – rather, we should learn how to deal with it.

Initially, reactions to the chances and opportunities posed by social media and the age of digital democracy were almost euphoric. The internet promised more transparency, an approachable political class, and a social discourse encompassing the entire public sphere. Yet even years ago, some approached the new media with scepticism. Jürgen Habermas, grand theorist of the structural transformation of the public sphere, warned of a potential decline in the quality of public discourse. He claimed, the public sphere threatened to splinter off into “random groups, united by special interests.” The past 18 months seem to have confirmed these fears. In the virtual realm, he claimed, the public sphere threatened to splinter off into “filter bubbles.” In the context of the Brexit campaign and the US presidential election, Facebook and other social networks functioned as a type of unsocial media, undermining public debate rather than reviving it. Hate speech tainted public discourse, while false news and targeted hacking attacks derailed it further. Data-driven information and manipulation campaigns, often in connection with the British firm Cambridge Analytica, made elections campaigns look like a farce. To many, it appeared as if social media was eating away at the very foundations of our democracies.

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That said, doom and gloom is not the only thing on the horizon. In many ways, the Internet and social media have changed our democracy for the better. Online petitions capture the sentiment of countless citizens, politicians are placed in direct contact with their voters via Facebook or Twitter, and more people than ever take part in public debates. Nevertheless, social media’s dark side is undeniably real: populist parties and movements in particular use automated bots, fake news and data-driven manipulation in their public relations campaigns.

Social media are a part of everyday life, particularly for young people.
work, while foreign hackers interfered with the American and French presidential elections. None of this, however, has really managed to sway the outcome of an election. Neither Cambridge Analytica, nor WikiLeaks or hackers alone made Donald Trump President of the United States. Hence, while this type of interference is unlikely to change the outcome of an election, it does threaten to undermine our trust in the political processes that make up the backbone of our political system. Fake news can increase citizens’ distrust in the media. Hate speech and social media bots threaten the viability of civilised public discourse online. Hacks and leaks, often mixed with disinformation, undermine public trust in the political establishment. Manipulative campaigns suggest that the ability to influence voting decision is only a click away.

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Responding to these challenges is not easy. The German Network Enforcement Law (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz or “NetzDG”) looks like a desperate and legally questionable attempt to somehow find an answer to the challenge posed by hate speech. The law imposes heavy fines on social networking companies should they fail to delete evidently illegal content from their websites within certain, very short time frames. What precisely is considered evidently illegal remains unclear.

In cases of uncertainty, an independent, “regulated self-regulatory” body is supposed to decide. By passing the law, the German federal government has outsourced the decision of what is considered criminal online hate speech, taking it out of the judiciary’s hands. The law is thus opposed not only by digital industry, but also by a broad alliance of civil society organisations concerned with human rights and freedom of speech. The initiative proves that not all social problems can be solved with premature legislative initiatives. Rather, we have to learn how to deal with the new media landscape. Targeted trainings and public campaigns should be used to increase media literacy in the population. Moreover, we need to learn how treat each other respectfully – online as well as offline. Children should be learning what constitutes good journalism and how it differs from propaganda in school. Audiences should begin scrutinising the news media rather than chasing after every headline. This is neither a fast nor an easy solution, but the Internet and social media will have a lasting impact on our public discourse – a process of change which, in turn, is connected to a social learning process. It is up to us to shape it.

→ Social media’s potential lies in its diversity and ubiquity.
In search of new approaches to reinvigorating social participation, we stumbled upon an increasingly popular format in China combining the informal flair of a pub night with intellectual discussions and exchange between young Chinese and foreigners. Eager to learn more about this new project, we spoke with Bulat Nurmukhanov, a student in International Relations at Beijing’s Renmin University and a member of ThinkIn China (TIC).

**ad hoc: What is ThinkIn China?**

Nurmukhanov: ThinkIn China (TIC) was founded in Beijing in September 2010 by a group of young researchers. Meeting at a popular café, it was born out of the genuine desire to build an informal platform outside the university framework, where Chinese and foreign academics of all ages could discuss and exchange ideas and information. TIC turned this informal platform into a living community by organising monthly public discussions with renowned Chinese scholars and social events that help young students and researchers access Beijing’s academic community. TIC can be seen as open space where people meet and ideas flow. It is a young, curious and passionate network that believes in knowledge based on direct experience, a community that wants to think about China – from within China.

**ad hoc: What is unique about the TIC format and the TIC community, and how does TIC differ from other initiatives?**

Nurmukhanov: TIC holds its events at Bridge Café in Wudaokou District, the heart of Beijing’s academic crossroads where most prominent universities are located. What makes us special is that we don’t have a formal format like universities, which often entail restrictions concerning the choice of topics or speakers. Instead, we combine academia with a fun and relaxed atmosphere, and involve people who are otherwise not engaged in contemporary China studies. We actively interact with our audience, who can also follow events online, and adapt new features such as WeChat live discussions to enable our guests to join further discussions and share links. This way, the discussion doesn’t end with the evening’s event. We produce summary videos of each event, and also feature podcasts and reports on our website.

Our monthly events are followed by a social component including free beer and pizza provided by our partner institutions [Torino World Affairs Institute, China Center Tübingen, Karl Schlecht Foundation; –ed.] and other sponsors.

**ad hoc: Why did you join the TIC organisational committee and what is your role?**

Nurmukhanov: I was invited by a friend and member of TIC in 2014. After attending the first event, I realised the platform was unique, and in fact the community I wanted to be part of. After joining the TIC team, I started off as an associate involved in PR and identifying potential speakers. Last year I was promoted to project officer, putting me in charge of team building, internal and external affairs, strategic planning and partner development.
ad hoc: Tell us more about TIC – who are the usual participants? How do you pick topics and speakers? Which language is used for the discussion?

Nurmukhanov: The monthly events start at 7pm. First, speakers are invited to talk for about 45 minutes, followed by a 30-minute Q&A session. This is followed by the open-ended social component and after-party. We usually have around 150 participants between 20–28 years old – students, young scholars, and some diplomats, roughly 80% of whom are from Western Europe, the US and Australia. The language of the event is English, thereby giving foreign students who don’t speak Chinese a chance to learn about China from the Chinese perspective. Sometimes we invite Chinese speakers whose English is not sufficient; in these cases, we provide interpreters to make TIC serve as bridge between Western and Chinese societies. We’ve also started reaching out more to the Chinese community and people from other Asian countries. The topics are chosen according to relevance: if there’s a referendum coming up, such as Brexit, we do something on that. At the last event, we had the former Prime Minister of Italy and former President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, who was also interviewed live by Caixin Global, the Chinese version of the Financial Times.

ad hoc: Were there any similar formats in Beijing before TIC, or have any followed since? Are there any spin-offs in other cities?

Nurmukhanov: TIC held one event each in Hangzhou and Chengdu, respectively. When we talk about organising events in other cities, it really all comes down to financing. Of course, there are also more opportunities in Beijing, and frankly speaking, it’s not as easy to find Chinese speakers with adequate English skills outside Beijing. Therefore, the TIC format could not simply be expanded to smaller cities. I estimate this could take at least another five years. There were no similar formats before us, and of the handful of attempts to replicate TIC so far, none were particularly successful. Our main strength is that our events are totally free and never require an RSVP or similar commitments, which makes us very flexible and easily accessible.

ad hoc: Thank you for talking with us, Bulat.
How Crowd Think Tanks Are Reinventing Democracy

by Florian Egli

Many would likely agree with Winston Churchill's renowned saying that democracy may be “the worst form of government... except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time”. But is that still the case in today’s globalised and technologised world?

On 30 October 2016, the European Council, the European Commission, and the Canadian government signed the free-trade agreement known as CETA. Prior to its signing, civic organisations in the European Union collected more than three million signatures in opposition. But what exactly did these three million citizens want? They cannot influence the agreement’s content. Elections, votes, and lawsuits continue to be the most powerful instruments of political participation, but they only allow for ex-post facto pronouncements, and are generally neither nuanced nor constructive. Another example can be found in Great Britain. How can governments and societies interpret 50:50 decisions such as Brexit? What does it mean to have a “hard” or “soft” Brexit, and how can the population express their preference? Perhaps the choice depends on the results of negotiations, the results of which are of course unknown beforehand.

It is tempting to respond to this complexity with hasty rhetoric and populism, but when populism wins out as the most effective road to political power, democracy suffers a loss of credibility. Rather than holding pertinent debates, explosive pseudo-controversies around topics like headscarves, the "infiltration" of social institutions, or the nation’s “loss of sovereignty” tend to dominate.

Two things can help us remedy this situation: first of all, democratic participation has to be easier and go deeper than a mere referendum or election. Unexpected help comes from the technological developments of the past years, which have not only contributed to the creation of filter bubbles and thus fuelled social polarisation, but also help us to re-think participation.

We have already seen some first experiments: in Estonia, citizens were permitted to cast their votes electronically for the first time in 2007. In Ireland, 33 politicians and 66 citizens chosen by lot worked out proposals for constitutional reform. At foraus, the first foreign policy crowd think tank, we are dedicated to developing similar forms of new participatory formats. In 2009, we founded an idea laboratory in which more than 1,000 young people now develop innovative solutions and approaches to international politics. Everyone is welcome to participate. Maintaining low barriers to participation was a conscious decision, designed to keep the debates as broad as possible. Interested people register for topical working groups and find co-authors through our network. Foraus offers a structured review process for content analysis to assure quality.

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For the past two years, foraus has organised so-called “Politische”, hosting dinners for roughly one hundred people across Switzerland to discuss the country’s future as a country of migration. The discussions were continued digitally through a crowdsourcing tool, allowing all Swiss citizens to contribute their own ideas and evaluate others. One result is the book Neuland (“New Land”), which puts forward a vision of Switzerland as a country of migration and opportunity in the 21st century. Unlike at established think tanks, this vision was not developed by select experts, but rather was a product of countless productive discussions.
The foraus model’s design was inspired by the Swiss tradition of direct democracy, but luckily does not depend on it. “Polis180” was founded in Berlin two years ago based on the foraus model, and is already among the top ten new think tanks worldwide. Other crowd think tanks were formed this year, such as “argo” and “agora” in Paris and London, while the US, Austria and other countries are in the planning stages. We are building the infrastructure for the first global open think tank, with a vision to establish a global match-making service that brings together the world’s best minds to find solutions and articulate complex issues.

A first international publication on ideas for reform in Europe, europe.think.again, was completed this spring. A Swiss-German expert duo is planned to comment on the German elections this fall. A Franco-German project on European security architecture as well as a European project on inclusion of people with little involvement in political issues are in preparation.

With this global network of open think tanks, we hope to break up today’s civic polarisation and work on complex topical issues productively with broad segments of the population. Climate change, digitalisation and artificial intelligence are coming whether we like it or not, and democracy will only find sustainable answers if it becomes faster and more participatory.

In May 2016, the Landsgemeinde, the open council of Glarus Canton, decided to consolidate many small communities into three larger municipalities.

Moderator Nicola Forster, president of the Swiss think tank “foraus”, moderates a foreign policy discussion with a group of citizens during an “Open Situation Room.”

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When the government asks – what do citizens answer?

by Cornelius Adebahr

The initial impetus for the citizens’ dialogue initiative “Which Europe Do We Want?” came not from the people of Germany but rather of Great Britain, whose vote in favour of Brexit shook diplomats at the German Foreign Office in Berlin to their very core. In response, they felt they had a straightforward remedy at hand: namely, talking directly to German citizens about their opinions on the state of the European Union. Since embarking on its own major policy review in 2014, the Foreign Office has hosted a number of innovative, people-oriented formats such as surveys, fishbowl discussions, and town hall meetings. Diplomats found they were able to quickly channel their post-referendum blues into productive avenues.

The core idea behind the series was to hold precisely the kind of open dialogue on Europe that had been missing in the heated climate around the UK referendum. This meant that listening had to come first: the main focus was on understanding citizens’ central concerns, while carefully contrasting them with the government’s own positions. A first kick-off workshop held in Berlin in October 2016 saw 400 young participants interact with then-Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, followed by 25 regional dialogue events across the country. From Rostock to Rosenheim and Wiesbaden to Weimar, Foreign Office representatives dialogued with interested citizens throughout the winter of 2016/17. In addition, five half-day events, called “Open Situation Rooms”, offered participants the chance to draw up their own project ideas aimed at improving European dialogue. A “Citizens’ Foreign Policy Workshop” focusing on European policy rounded out the series: following a discussion with the Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel shortly after he took office, 120 participants developed their own expectations and visions of Europe, discussing them with high-ranking officials.

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With regard to the keyword “participation”, two points should be highlighted. First, the Foreign Office’s series did not reach as many citizens as originally expected. Rather than the anticipated 150 attendees per event, the average participation rate was closer to 80. Yet both the announcements and subsequent reporting in the local press, as well the Foreign Office’s regular social media channels, reached an audience of over three...
Feedback for politicians

Million readers (offline and online). Furthermore, the high quality of citizens' contributions and questions evidenced a firm baseline understanding of European politics, which allowed government officials (to their surprise, perhaps) to benefit from the discussions as well.

This leads us to the second point regarding participation: given that outright opponents of European integration did not manage to find their way to the events, what, indeed, was the series' target group? In general, all citizens were encouraged to participate in the dialogues. The 25 town hall meetings were open events without prior registration, while the five “Open Situation Rooms”, the kick-off event, and the concluding workshop only required an application for reasons of limited capacity. Nevertheless, although the event venues were selected specifically for their accessibility, it should be noted that not everyone finds their way to the local publishing house, town hall, theatre, or museum.

The conversation was thus by no means a mere exchange of pleasantries

Still, it turned out that even an exchange with this subgroup – the “middle class” in the broadest sense – had its merits. On the one hand, those who were willing to engage in a discussion on Europe with a government official still presented a wide range of criticisms concerning the state of the EU, as well as individual government positions; the conversation was thus by no means a mere exchange of pleasantries. On the other, this audience in particular exhibited a great deal of appreciation for the government's attempt to initiate dialogue. Many participants had previously expressed their desire to contribute to an open, peaceful and democratic Europe – the fact that high-ranking government officials from the capital travelled to these regions to serve as interlocutors was therefore highly appreciated.

Finally, then, how did citizens respond to the key question asked of them – namely, which Europe do they want? In order to at least develop a general impression, the Foreign Office summarized the discussions in a SWOT-analysis: which contributions highlighted the strengths (S) and weaknesses (W) of the EU itself, and which focused on opportunities (O) and threats (T) in the European environment? Furthermore, participants were invited to write comments on postcards directly addressed to the organisers, describing what improvements they thought were necessary for the EU.

The emerging picture contained many more weaknesses than strengths, and more threats than opportunities for the EU – as was to be expected in light of current public discourse on the European malaise. The weaknesses described ranged from a lack of European solidarity (including financial solidarity with Southern Europe, for example), complaints that 70 years of peace and freedom were not sufficiently appreciated, to the well-known distance between the institutions in Brussels and European citizens as a whole. Some criticized the EU for its “fortress Europe” policy when dealing with refugees, while others were dissatisfied with its regulatory craze. When it comes to criticising Europe, it seems, there really is something for everyone.

Frequently, participating citizens had high expectations, particularly within those policy areas where competencies continue to reside with the member states rather than the Union as a whole (such as defence policy or socio-economic questions like labour market policy and tax harmonisation). At the same time, many participants saw the largest opportunity for the EU in what currently is perceived as its biggest threat: they hoped that national and European decision makers would understand the Brexit decision, the election of US President Trump, as well as the resurgence of populist and nationalistic tendencies across Europe as a wake-up call, and double down on their mandate to build a democratic Europe rooted in solidarity.

In this sense, the Foreign Office saw its own mandate strengthened via the “detour” of these dialogues. Interaction with citizens does not necessarily bring about new ideas or insights all of the time. However, it offers diplomats direct feedback on their own work and gives citizens a larger say (at least from their perspective) by facilitating informed discussions. In that sense, a dialogue with the government can serve as a meaningful addition to the regular streams of citizens’ influence, channelled through their elected representatives and parliamentary procedures. In light of the current tensions in the transatlantic relationship, the next question for such an event series could thus be “What kind of partnership with the United States do we want?”

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Counting ‘till dawn, when the light comes

by Sebastian Grafe

A crowded polling station in a northern neighbourhood of the Armenian capital, Yerevan. Lilit Mansurian (name changed by the editor) is an observer from “Yelk”, the most important (and recently founded) opposition party. She loudly calls attention to a man in the polling station who has repeatedly accompanied elderly women to the polling booth, which he does not have the right to do. The chairwoman of the election board intervened only reluctantly, and despite the obvious influencing of the vote, took no action against the group of men milling about in front of the station waiting to accompany voters. Police officers engaged the “election workers” in pleasant small talk, although the new election law stipulates that such groups be disbanded. Confronted with the state of things in the polling station, my Armenian interpreter asked me with alarm: “Can’t you step in?”

Sunday, 2 April 2017: I am on duty as an election observer for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Yerevan’s Arabkir district, a dense area with a large number of buildings packed into a small space. The better-educated and politically-interested citizens with mixed views on the European Union who live here are fought over by both government and the opposition. Many Armenians consider their country an integral part of Europe, particularly as it was the first country to impose Christianity as the state religion in 301, but the government backed away from a European Union Association Agreement in 2013 under Russian pressure. This spring, a softer deal was signed with the EU in the form of the so-called “Partnership and Cooperation Agreement”. The aforementioned opposition party Yelk favours more cooperation with Europe, while the Republican Party of Armenia, leader of the hitherto existing coalition government, seeks to continue on a pro-Russian course. At this point a majority of Armenian companies are owned by Russians, but entering the Eurasian Economic Union under Moscow’s direction failed to bring benefits to the Armenian economy. Instead, the economic sanctions imposed on Russia in the wake of crises in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine ended up having negative effects on the South Caucasus, as well.

Large segments of the population depend on remittances from Armenians living in Russia, while last year, rising electricity prices drove citizens onto the streets. With 5,000 Russian soldiers stationed in Armenia, Moscow also pursues geostrategic interests in the region. The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan blocks any development towards détente.

This difficult situation served as the backdrop of the Armenian parliamentary elections, to which the OSCE dispatched 250 election observers. I visited ten polling stations in Arabkir on election day together with an American colleague, and observed one count until 4:00am. The results of the count we observed confirmed the opposition’s expected success in this part of Yerevan. With a nationwide turnout of slightly over 60 percent, the Republican Party gained 49.15 percent compared to Yelk’s 7.78 percent; the former soon decided to continue the current coalition government together with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation.

Party representatives were present and illicitly took part in the count

Although both voting and counting processes were quite well-organised, the count lasted more than eight hours, further delayed because reports had to be written out by hand. Party representatives were present and illicitly took part in the count. No coherent interpretation existed as to what qualified as an invalid ballot. The next day, it came to light that party workers had taken on false identities and posed as independent observers, sometimes from fictional non-governmental organisations.

Verifying voters’ documents and taking fingerprints using machines from Germany and other countries proved time-consuming. Many voters were also frustrated by the complicated voting process, which often led to hold-ups and jams – not to mention the intimidation posed by the so-called “companions” dubiously accompanying voters to the polling station. When OSCE observers witness election fraud or tampering, they have only one option: never step in, but check the corresponding field
OSCE observers reported instances of illegal influencing of voters at seven percent of visited stations – high enough to have a substantial impact on the outcome. It was also for this reason that the OSCE spoke of a lack of public confidence in the electoral process.

When OSCE observers witness election fraud or tampering, they have only one option: never step in, but check the corresponding field on the observation form instead.

The modern technology in the polling station was designed to prevent fraud. While the political opposition in many post-Soviet countries sees new technology like surveillance cameras, computers for document verification and fingerprint collection as a chance to uncover or minimise electoral fraud, the increased use of technology is neglected in many Western European countries due to privacy concerns or the possibility of external manipulation.

The modern technology in the polling station was designed to prevent fraud.

The Armenian opposition’s search for more transparency through technology is perfectly understandable; however, when the main obstacles to free and fair elections lie in the country’s political culture - shaped by corruption and limited media access - the impact of Western technological aid is limited. Ultimately, the Armenian people will have to push the process towards a more democratic society forward themselves. In this context, the OSCE’s statement can help the opposition to better demand new reforms, while, at the same time, the EU and the German government must stay alert and seek to prevent the Caucasus from only being taken into account when the next crisis arrives.

Sebastian Graefe, cohort of 2002/03, is a DGAP Associate Fellow and works as an analyst with the German Armed Forces’ Centre for Civil Military Cooperation. His deployment to Armenia (the subject of this article) was his third short-term election observation mission with the OSCE.

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How left-of-centre Americans are overcoming divides while their distance to Trump supporters grows — Observations from Washington, D.C.

“So, which protest are you going to this weekend?” my hairdresser asks. He hails from a rural part of California and his parents voted for Trump. He was interested in politics prior to the 2016 elections, but not particularly engaged. This changed dramatically after Donald Trump took office. Ever since January, he invites his friends to join him at rallies, explains the importance of labour unions, and tries to show them that the majority of protesters are perfectly normal people in no way interested in burning trashcans. He is far from alone: at the Women’s March held one day after Trump’s inauguration, about one third of participants reported they were attending a protest for the first time. The local online magazine DCist, meanwhile, recommended going to a protest together as a romantic winter date. Stephen Colbert, a popular late-night talk show host, joked that St. Patrick’s Day would soon be recast as a protest against sobriety.

The past nine months have witnessed a rapid politicisation of left-of-centre Americans. Trump’s victory served as a wake-up call, especially for moderate, well-situated, white, educated Americans, i.e. those who were relatively satisfied with the status quo until recently. By and large, they thought that racism had been overcome, deportations were justified, and equal rights for LGBT persons had been achieved through the Supreme Court’s marriage equality decision. Today, these same people are looking up the closest protest on an online platform called “Resistance Near Me”.

Old and new activists not only meet in the streets, but also pack town halls to ask critical questions when members of Congress visit their districts, and participate in trainings to learn how to intervene when witnessing racism or Islamophobia. Hillary Clinton supporters continue to actively use the “Pantsuit Nation” Facebook groups, originally created in anticipation of her electoral victory. Bernie Sanders’s supporters, meanwhile, connect through the “Our Revolution” platform, meeting up in each other’s living rooms to support progressive candidates. (My neighbour gratefully remarked that, thanks to Bernie, his shared flat had finally been thoroughly cleaned by the roommates.)

Not only is this new activism good news for general civic engagement in the country, it is also fostering new alliances across the political left. At “Beyond the Moment”, organisations come together to advocate for the rights of minorities and workers as well as the protection of the environment. The name echoes Martin Luther King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech, in which he called for a revolution of values and explained why the peace movement and the civil rights movement belonged together. In Maryland, so-called “huddle groups” founded in the wake of the Women’s March support immigrant families threatened by deportation. The Clinton campaign recently created the organisation “Onward Together”, which provides

USA: Activism in the Trump era
The growing political activism in opposition to the Trump administration is remarkable, and the realisation that citizens can and must become engaged beyond voting in elections is certainly good news for the future of American democracy. However, this same activism could also entail significant risks should the opposition fail to involve broader society and end up excluding rather than including people. Showing Up for Racial Justice, an organization dedicated to fighting white supremacy primarily by educating white Americans about racism, has therefore chosen inclusion as one of their seven guiding principles: “Calling people in, not out.” Hopefully, others will follow their example.

Many liberal Americans’ Tinder profiles now frankly state “No Trump supporters”

However, while the politicisation of liberal Americans forges new alliances and builds bridges on the political left, the rift between them and Trump supporters only seems to deepen. Conservative tourists in DC proudly wear their red “Make America Great Again” baseball caps; teenagers mimic protest chants and demonstrate that they, too, are ready to fight, shouting “We won’t go!” Many liberal Americans’ Tinder profiles now frankly state “No Trump supporters”. Recently, a boy of about eight years walked past a protest in front of the Trump Hotel, proudly pointing to his red MAGA cap. Some protesters immediately began shouting “I’m sorry for you!” and “Shame, shame, shame!” One of the organisers quickly grabbed the microphone and changed the chant to “Love Trumps Hate!”, but the boy had already vanished through the hotel entrance.

The growing political activism in opposition to the Trump administration is remarkable, and the realisation that citizens can and must become engaged beyond voting in elections is certainly good news for the future of American democracy. However, this same activism could also entail significant risks should the opposition fail to involve broader society and end up excluding rather than including people. Showing Up for Racial Justice, an organization dedicated to fighting white supremacy primarily by educating white Americans about racism, has therefore chosen inclusion as one of their seven guiding principles: “Calling people in, not out.” Hopefully, others will follow their example.

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Change comes from the cities

by Daphne Büllesbach

Urban development has accompanied historical progress on our continent since the Middle Ages. Cities are simultaneously the stage and central protagonist of any process of economic, cultural and social transformation. New modes of production and work organisation as well as the expansion of land and real estate speculation are fundamentally urban phenomena. These processes generate new contradictions and imbalances, often exacerbated by austerity policies, while reactions to these processes have made cities places of resistance and innovation.

The European Commission (EC) recently highlighted the leading role played by cities and metropolitan areas, emphasising the need for stronger coordination and exchange between them. More than 70% of Europeans live in urban areas, where 75% of energy consumption and 80% of emissions are also concentrated, placing cities at the forefront of managing the world’s resources in a sustainable and climate-friendly way.

Such considerations are even more important in light of the ongoing crisis of legitimacy and agency afflicting both EU institutions and individual nation-states when it comes to dealing with these global challenges. In precisely such a critical context, cities – as was the case in previous crucial moments of transition in European history – can play a leading role. They can serve as sites of democratic reinvention by taking advantage of the relative proximity to citizens and direct involvement in decision making.

In doing so, they can provide citizen-powered answers to major challenges facing our contemporary world, acknowledging, of course, that other levels of governance, both regional and supranational, must also bring solutions to the table.

Governments of change

A long “municipalist” tradition is waiting to be rediscovered, and is currently undergoing a revival in the experiences of new governments “of change.” Most readers will probably know the “Plataformas Ciudadanas” – civic platforms born out of the 15M movements that filled the squares of the Iberian Peninsula in 2011, and which in May 2015 won local elections in some of the most important cities in the Spanish State, beginning with the election of Ada Colau as mayor of Barcelona, Manuela Carmena in Madrid, followed by Valencia, A Coruna, Zaragoza and many more. These new Spanish municipal governments represent some of the most important achievements in urban struggles for democracy and social justice in recent memory.

In just two years in office, the new governments in these cities have introduced important innovations in local governance. They focus on strengthening transparency and returning citizens’ direct participation to the decision-making process, such as Madrid’s new digital platform known as Decide Madrid. They have also chosen to invest more resources in new
welfare policies to counter the spread of mass impoverishment caused by the crisis. For instance, they intervened in urban planning, establishing housing policies more favourable to low-income residents, and have set up programs supporting a fairer and more inclusive social economy by changing the rules of local tenders and procurements to be oriented towards social interests and the commons over purely economic considerations. These processes are by no means limited to Spain – cities such as Naples in Italy have “re-municipalised” essential local public services like water and power grids.

Cities of refuge
In contrast to national and European policies, many European cities have decided to welcome refugees. This represents active engagement on the part of those cities to go beyond the “lack of solidarity” debate conducted on the national level, and address the shameful number of 9,000 reallocated refugees from Turkey and Greece since the EU-Turkey deal promised to relocate another 120,000. Gdansk, Thessaloniki, Naples, Grenoble and many more cities have put themselves forward as shelter cities, and offered to bring refugees and newcomers into their homes. Motivations are both humanistic and value-driven, as they are also based on economic and demographic considerations in ageing societies. The most striking initiative in terms of concreteness and feasibility is led by Gesine Schwan in partnership with various cities, such as Gdansk in Poland. She advocates for the EC to implement a direct financing mechanism to directly support cities with economic integration and sustainable social and cultural inclusion of refugees.

Beyond the nation-state
“We, the cities, have the knowledge, the value of proximity, and the strength of collective intelligence to address these global problems.” These words were spoken by the three female mayors of Barcelona, Madrid and Paris at the UN Habitat Conference in Quito, which also witnessed the drafting of the New Urban Agenda. They urge for the necessary financial resources and governmental powers – to address challenges like growing social inequality, the threat of climate change, and welcome people fleeing wars, persecutions and misery – to be placed not in the hands of nation-states, but in those of cities.

“We, the cities, have the knowledge, the value of proximity, and the strength of collective intelligence to address these global problems.”

It is thus no surprise that talk of “rebel cities”, to use radical geographer David Harvey’s formulation, is on the rise: in Southern Europe (but not only, as our mapping shows), an alternative government policy emerging at the local level marks a possible path for the struggles against austerity, social “precarisation”, and mass impoverishment. Moreover, it also proves to be an effective antidote to the aggressive growth of the populist and nationalist right, such as the Front National, the Alternative für Deutschland, the Polish PIS Party, or the Five Star Movement – dangerous European variants of a US-style “Trumpism”.

Daphne Bülbuech, a 2009/10 fellow, is Managing Director of European Alternatives, a Europe-wide civil society organisation devoted to exploring and developing potentials for transnational politics and culture. She is co-curator of the Transeuropafestival held in Belgrade in 2015 and in Madrid in 2017, and co-editor of the reader Shifting Baselines of Europe (transcript 2017). daphnebue@gmail.com
The bicycle remains incredibly popular as a mean of transport, falling in line with the desire for liveable, people-friendly cities. The “Volksentscheid Fahrrad”, a community group supporting a Berlin-wide referendum on bicycle laws, has advanced a legislative process towards a bicycle-friendly city, and thereby triggered a broad civic movement for traffic turnaround in cities far beyond Berlin itself.

Those who get around Berlin by bike know that there are many good sides, but some negative ones as well – a morning trip through the misty fog in Tiergarten, an evening ride along the Spree or biking in a group on Schönhauser Allee, but also the dangerous and frightening 40-ton truck right next to you, slowly approaching and slipping into your lane, often narrow and only marked by white paint. Children are hardly ever seen here.

When the car-friendly city really began to take off in the 1960s, bike lanes were not so much considered a serious method of transport as a social policy for the underprivileged. Today, this kind of thinking is undergoing a fundamental shift. Berlin’s Oberbaum Bridge recently hit the 20,000-bicycles-per-day mark, equalling the traffic on many of the city’s main streets. Nevertheless, infrastructural development has hardly kept pace. New bicycle lanes are only “marked” with paint, while many bike paths remain narrow and riven with tree roots.

On a Thursday night at the Technical University of Berlin, around 30 people have gathered to change that. They have organised themselves under the banner of “Volksentscheid Fahrrad”, united by the desire to get through the city safely and comfortably. The group is not comprised of daring bike messengers and racing cyclists, but rather citizens of all ages and educational backgrounds: a fresh high school graduate, university students, an engineering graduate, an older woman who used to be a squatter. Experienced activists and traffic planners share their knowledge with new faces.

Volksentscheid Fahrrad wants to see Berlin become a bicycle-friendly metropolis, in which anyone from age 8 to 88 should be able to travel safely by bike. To this aim, they call for two meter-wide bike lanes physically divided from car lanes along all main streets, a 350-kilometer bicycle path, and legally-mandated safety improvements at all dangerous intersections. Seventeen cyclists were killed in Berlin last year, yet most politicians do little more than pay lip service to the issue.
A core group came together in the fall of 2015. Back then, the “Volksentscheid” was formed around a popular petition for a bicycle law. During the first round, 100,000 signatures were collected within four weeks, as opposed to the minimum requirement of 20,000 signatures within six months.

The referendum became a topic of interest among Berlin residents like no other. The city witnessed numerous demonstrations and activities, such as solemn vigils in the wake of accidents, demonstrative rolling out of a “Red Carpet for Cyclists” on main streets, and even cycling into the river Spree under the motto: “Climate Protection tanks”. The civic initiative knows how to provide effective imagery and keep the topic in the news. Almost a third of Berliners already use their bikes daily according to a survey conducted by Forsa, and more than two thirds support extending the bike paths. Even the German automobile club ADAC has suddenly begun demanding more bike lanes along main streets.

**Cycling into the river Spree:**
The civic initiative knows how to provide effective imagery and keep the topic in the news.

Although the Berlin section of the General German Bicycle Club (ADFC) has pushed for better conditions for cyclists on boards and committees for decades, the Volksentscheid’s activist methods have undoubtedly accelerated the public debate around bicycle traffic.

In the spring of 2017, the governing coalition in Berlin comprised of Die Linke, the Social Democrats and the Greens began negotiating a cyclists’ law with activists and an ADFC representative. The Senate failed to meet deadlines, however, and the promise to implement a law by June went unfulfilled.

The process is said to be trapped in parliamentary gridlock, prompting the Volksentscheid to announce new activities in response.

Danish city planner Jan Gehl teaches that liveable cities foster human interaction, which, in turn, makes the bicycle the ideal urban traffic system. Copenhagen has not become one of the world’s most attractive cities despite its massive investment into non-motorised traffic, but rather precisely because of it. Climate goals make bicycle traffic an urgent necessity as well, and is one of the reasons why the goal of a liveable city is being pursued by ever more stakeholders across different fields of interest. Since 2017, citizens, local ADFC groups, stores and neighbourhood groups have organised themselves into bicycle-friendly networks to work together on making their city a better place to live. Everyone is invited to join and build a broad movement together with the Volksentscheid. The nationwide Volksentscheid has its roots in the very first initiative of its kind, the “Network for a Bicycle-Friendly Neukölln”.

The interest in the Berlin model is huge across Germany. Other cities have formed similar initiatives – Bamberg, for example, already has its own Volksentscheid. “Volksentscheid Fahrrad” offers Barcamps in other cities like Hamburg and Stuttgart under the #TurnYourCity motto. The main association has meanwhile changed its name to “Changing Cities” – the (traffic) turnaround initiated by citizens themselves.

*Steffen Lohrey researches adaption to climate change, extreme weather, and mobility in cities. As a 2015/16 Mercator fellow, he went to the World Bank in Washington – and took his bicycle with him. He supports the Volksentscheid Fahrrad in Berlin to create a city with more bicycle traffic and thus an improved, climate-friendly quality of life.*

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In both Germany and Switzerland, children’s rights organisations argue that children should be granted voting and election rights from birth. “From a democratic perspective, it is indefensible to exclude children from voting and elections, as they will have to live with these decisions for the longest period of time”, argues Thomas Handschin.

The argument has proven polarising. The Swiss Children’s Lobby and the German Family Association both advocate for voting and election rights from birth, although a motion proposed in 2008 has never been debated by the Swiss parliament. The Federal Council argues that it would be nearly impossible to translate the text into practice for legal and practical reasons. Thomas Handschin explains why he nevertheless continues to fight for voting and election rights for children.

ad hoc: Mr. Handschin, you support voting and election rights for babies. Your detractors, however, call this nonsense. How do you respond?
Handschin: Usually, political decisions have no expiration date, and it is thus the youngest who will have to live with these decisions for the longest period of time. From a democratic perspective, it is indefensible to exclude them from elections and voting. No one expects small children to fill in ballots themselves; parents will do this on their behalf. Voting will become as natural as cooking for their children, helping them get dressed, and accompanying them to school.

ad hoc: How do you envisage voting and election rights from birth in practice?
Handschin: Following birth, children are granted full voting and election rights and receive the usual documentation, just like their parents. Parents can vote and elect on behalf of their children until the children decide to fill in the ballots themselves. It does not matter whether the child is eight, 13 or 17 years old. This transition is not subject to any kind of registration with authorities, but is rather a matter decided upon within the family. Refusing to establish a minimum age prevents situations where children who have their own opinion on questions being voted upon cannot put a ballot in the box. Voting and election rights from birth puts an end to this injustice. Such a system would finally fulfil the requirement of “one individual – one vote”.

ad hoc: Is there not a high risk that parents could abuse their children’s voting rights?
Handschin: One should rather speak of abuse when parents’ votes violate the interests of their children, as such behaviour would be inconsistent with the much more natural parental urge to ensure only the best for them. Of course, nobody can control parents’ loyalty when they vote in an election, meaning that abuse cannot be prevented or punished. In practice, however, abuse will probably be very rare. The fear of abuse should not be considered a genuine argument against voting and election rights for children. Instead, it is abusive to exclude children from the democratic process.
ad hoc: What impact would voting and election rights for children have on our society?

Handschin: It is obvious that children are the future of our country, and will one day govern it. Yet paradoxically, they have to wait 18 years for democracy to take this fact into account. In the meantime, democracy treats children as a private family matter, in the same way that couples can decide whether they want to buy a dog. As soon as children get on board of the steamboat of democracy, they will vigorously determine the course of the entire country.

In Switzerland and Germany, children below the age of 18 account for 20% of the population. Many election results in Europe and Switzerland end in a stalemate, making governing more complicated. Extending the electorate to this large segment of society with its specific interests would facilitate clearer majorities – even though children do not always agree, of course.

Should voting and election rights from birth be introduced, parties would inevitably seek to win over new constituencies. They would thus be compelled to add child- and family-friendly issues to their agenda and propose motions that take the interests of children into account. Youth will use the right to launch initiatives and thereby ensure that the people – of which they will be a part – discuss and vote on their demands.

ad hoc: Mr Handschin, thank you for talking with us.

Stefanie Rinaldi, a 2011/12 fellow, is a human rights consultant and trainer. She educates NGO staffs, administrations and schools in human and children’s rights, leads workshops for students, and advises institutions in the implementation of human rights-based approaches. She is currently involved in projects in Switzerland, Cameroon and India.

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Thomas Handschin is a member of the Children’s Lobby in Switzerland, which he represents in the campaign “Nur wer wählt, zählt!” organised by the German Family Association. He is the author of the brochure “One child – one vote!! Das Kinderstimmrecht: Die Demokratie entdeckt eine Generation”.

Political needs and interests do not begin with legal adulthood.
Exchange programs for tolerance – for every student!

by Likki-Lee Pitzen

Cheerful teens posing mid-jump in front of the Golden Gate Bridge, or holding up hand-painted fans on the Great Wall of China – anyone who has ever considered a school year abroad will recognise images like these from the glitzy promotional brochures of international student exchange programs. While critics view such selective and often costly programs as must-haves for the children of the elite, supporters tout them as nothing less than a contribution to mutual understanding between nations. But what if there were an exchange program accessible to entire school classes rather than a select, affluent few, that taught intercultural sensitivity without all of the air miles?

Why we need such a program more than ever before and how it could look like – scrutinising both sides of the coin.

A student exchange program for everyone? Seriously? Who will pay for it, and how would it work? Sounds like another hippie fantasy. Easy there – we’re talking a promising and workable idea. One step at a time: following close elections in the Netherlands and France and the openly xenophobic Alternative für Deutschland’s gains at the German state parliament level, even those not so interested in politics must admit that right-wing populism is on the rise across Europe. This rise is largely driven by political forces stoking fear of the foreign: foreign cultures, customs, and faiths, all inevitably set to threaten one’s own way of life (according to the logic of the right, of course).

No doubt about that, but fear-mongering und anti-immigrant campaigns didn’t start yesterday, and AfD rallies are also met by plenty of counter-protesters. Absolutely correct, xenophobia is not a new phenomenon. In fact, as an effective measure to combat intolerance and strengthen an open-minded society, the first international student exchange was established not long after World War II between Germany and the US. Over the course of this development, between 15,000 and 20,000 German students aged 15–17 years now go abroad for a minimum of three months every year. Despite looking impressive on paper, however, 20,000 students constitute just 2% of all students in that age group in Germany. 2% which are even less representative in light of the fact that they are disproportionately made up of students from progressive urban centres like Hamburg, Berlin, and Bremen. Moreover, although the number of scholarships is increasing, most students still hail from affluent, academic families. By and large, international student exchange remains a far cry from being inclusive or equitable.

Although the number of scholarships is increasing, most students still hail from affluent, academic families.

Well, OK, but how exactly is there supposed to be a program for every student then? Enabling students to experience a different cultural and socio-economic environment can be achieved at a far more affordable and larger scale through exchange within a single country. Organisations in Indonesia, a country which defines itself as multi-ethnic and multi-religious, have already taken up this
concept to promote tolerance in a diverse society. In 2012, three students launched the Sabang Merauke program, which allows 12–15-year-old students from all corners of the country to travel to the capital Jakarta and live with a family of an ethnic and religious background different than their own.

Good for them, but can you really compare Indonesia to Germany? Indeed, Germany neither stretches across 17,000 islands and three time zones, nor is it officially home to 30 different ethnicities and some 500 sub-groups thereof. Nevertheless, Germany is now characterised by an impressive degree of diversity with a share of foreign-born residents reaching 13% – just like the US. Intra-national student exchange could therefore improve understanding and interaction between various cultures and communities, whether between regions or even between districts of the same city.

All noble and fair, but the question remains as to how this would actually work: just send all of the kids to Berlin for a week?!

In fact, such a program was already successfully implemented in Germany once before, to bridge the gap between East and West after reunification. Initiated by then-president Johannes Rau in 2002, the three-year program saw 50 schools from former Eastern and Western Germany each send their students to participate in a three-day exchange. The official goal of the program, which ended in 2005, was to “promote Germany’s domestic unity”. Beyond unity between the Eastern and Western parts of the country, the program also contributed to unity in a broader way: while one girl from the Eastern town of Erfurt wrote about her excitement at living with her exchange partner’s Turkish family in Berlin, the young Berliner reported pleasant surprise at the open-minded attitude found among the small-town inhabitants of Erfurt.

Right. But if it actually was so successful, why was it discontinued after 2005?

For a new generation of young people born well after reunification, the East/West divide is simply a thing of the past. However, German society today is more multicultural than ever before, and therefore faces an unprecedented need to unite in its diversity. In October of 2016, then-state secretary Frank-Walter Steinmeier hosted a conference titled “Tolerance and Diversity”, where he frankly quipped that “Germany could still learn a lot when it comes to tolerance”. With him now serving as president, there could be no better time to (re-)launch an inclusive intra-national student exchange program in Germany.

Additional scholarships help young people be mobile: these pupils took part in a program between Germany, China and Turkey in 2013.

Likki-Lee Pitzen, fellow 2016/17, knows the power of renewable energy is yet to unfold. The Fellowship saw her work on utility-scale energy finance with the World Bank Energy Team in Jakarta and with IFC Advisory in Washington DC, before she followed off-grid energy’s flaring glimmer and joined LHGP in Nairobi. likkilee@gmail.com
How volunteering strengthens democracy

by Sarah Bidoli

I am a volunteer talent mentor. At least in my case, “mentoring” has nothing to do with singing or dancing. Instead, once a week I meet with my mentee from Neukölln, a neighbourhood in Berlin. Twelve-year-old Mina and I go to the museum or the cinema, we bake or tinker around. Most of the time, however, we simply walk through the park, do her homework for the next day of school, and spend time together.

Mina and I got to know each other last year through afternoon activities organised by the “Neuköllner Talente” (Talents of Neukölln) project, sponsored by the civil society foundation “Bürgerstiftung Neukölln”. The project aims to promote the talents of children who live in Berlin’s Neukölln district and speak a mother tongue other than German. A sponsor and mentor is assigned to every child who signs up. In regular meetings, the children are introduced to various activities in order to figure out what suits them. The same is true for mentors: they are not only expected to suggest activities to the children, but discover something as well – about themselves, about children in general, and about what kids are up to these days.

It is less about discovering and activating hidden talents in the first place, as the “talent scout” talent may suggest, and primarily about breaking out of one’s own filter bubble.

I expected the project to be a challenge. I had already worked as a volunteer with seniors and adults, but working with children was a new task for me. In my head, I pictured an ideal child-adult friendship: the child would learn new skills and adopt the adult as his or her role model, while the mentors, in return, would reconnect with their inner child, rediscovering a childlike naïveté and enthusiasm.

This may very well be the case for some tandems, but my experience so far has been a bit different. It is less about discovering and activating hidden talents in the first place, as the “talent scout” talent may suggest, and primarily about breaking out of one’s own filter bubble. This applies to both parties, to Mina and to me. The child does not look up to anyone, nor does the adult necessarily have to learn a new skill. During our meeting, both are simply immersed in a different part of life, free of obligations to learn anything. We did not discover or develop any talents during our visits to the museum or during our walks, and yet our meetings left an impression on me for their simplicity.

While volunteering as a mentor, I realised that children are an active part of our society. This may sound obvious, but I personally did not know the extent to which children reflect on complicated topics. How children see the world is best understood by spending time with them. The project reminded me to take how other age groups see the world into consideration, and to think more about other generations in my everyday life.

This also applies to cultural differences. To develop a better understanding of my neighbours, interaction is crucial. This statement sounds almost banal and self-evident, but then again, no one really knows their neighbours in big cities, right? In response, we could
Questions such as “how can I contribute to my society?”, “what choices do I have as a citizen?”, or “what opportunities are available to me at all?” are at the heart of a functioning society. Only when I ask myself these questions can I engage as an active part of society: being aware of all possible opportunities, making decisions based on them, and getting involved are important traits of a responsible citizen and of a society in which everyone can participate.

Volunteering brings people together and contributes to a democratic and inclusive society, and is why I am happy to shout “Put your hands together for Mina!” Thank you for showing me your world and teaching me new things without even trying. This project is not just an opportunity for me to ask questions about our society, but also the beginning of a wonderful friendship.

The community foundation organises sponsorships and events for all citizens.

To develop a better understanding of my neighbours, interaction is crucial.

The project “Neuköllner Talente” made me particularly aware of the fact that interactions between different social groups are fundamental to a well-functioning, inclusive society, and not only for one’s own development of intercultural and inter-generation skills. Democracy in general can only be strengthened if we develop an understanding of how we can shape society as individuals.

Questions such as “how can I contribute to my society?”, “what choices do I have as a citizen?”, or “what opportunities are available to me at all?” are at the heart of a functioning society. Only when I ask myself these questions can I engage as an active part of society: being aware of all possible opportunities, making decisions based on them, and getting involved are important traits of a responsible citizen and of a society in which everyone can participate.

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"We are what we create together" is the guiding principle behind the Global Innovation Gathering (GIG), a community of innovation centres, makerspaces, hackerspaces and similar initiatives, as well as individual innovators, makers, technologists and change-makers. Employing a Do-It-Yourself approach, they tackle global social challenges with technical solutions at the lowest cost possible. GIG has been officially registered as a non-profit organisation in Berlin since late 2016.

GIG was launched in 2013 at the internet conference re:publica, a large gathering which attracts numerous international speakers to Berlin to discuss perspectives, challenges and technological solutions. The group expressed a desire to use and further develop the momentum of the conference and its international composition. Over the past four years, the community has grown and developed several influential projects, three of which are presented here:

The first #PeaceHackCamp took place in South Sudan in December 2015, the second in Colombia in 2016, and most recently in Egypt in May 2017. Lasting two to three days or longer, people from the local area are invited to workshops on media training, innovation and peace education. Through shared experiences of discovery and experimentation, mutual understanding is established and strengthened between people of different political persuasions, ethnic origins, and other differences. Together, they develop concepts for sustainable and peaceful coexistence. An influential online campaign developed in South Sudan as part of the PeaceHackCamp is called #defyhatenow, and is directed against online hate speech and calls to violence. On Twitter and Facebook, the hashtag features texts, pictures and videos highlighting hate speech and sensitising the population, particularly around political events and advocacy for peaceful coexistence.

To support the ongoing digital and economic transformation in Africa, members of the GIG network developed the policy recommendation #i4policy, and presented it at this year’s Transform Africa summit. Two of the submitted recommendations are designed to improve the public procurement of industrial development and innovation, as well as the necessary relaxation of regional trade regulations.

The #Labmobile is a mobile maker and hackerspace, born out of conversations within the network mainly between Tarek Omar, the founder of the Egyptian MakerExpress, and Victoria Wenzelmann, who purchased the blue bus, which is currently stationed in Greece. Shortly after its inauguration at this year’s re:publica and subsequent Berlin Maker Faire, “Big Blue” went on a journey across Europe. In June of this year, Victoria and Sam Bloch of the disaster relief organisation Communitere drove the Labmobile from Berlin through the Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria to Thessaloniki, Greece. Along the way, they made stops at Makerspaces like the Makers Lab in Prague, Happylab and Metalab in Vienna, Makerspace in Budapest. They also visited organisations pursuing innovative approaches to support refugees, such as the OPENmarx project run by the Future Lab at the Vienna University of Technology, or the Council of Refugee Women in Sofia. During its Thessaloniki deployment, the Labmobile uses a trailer built for the workshop to host the Mobile Resource Center, which Communitere provides to partner organisations working with refugees and the local population. The Labmobile’s next mission is currently in its planning stages.

What is GIG?
The Global Innovation Gathering (GIG) is a network of global cooperation based on equality, transparency, and the intercultural and interdisciplinary exchange of knowledge. To foster more diversity in technology and innovation processes, activists and innovators with deep roots in the Global South come together to develop open and sustainable products for global challenges. Further information on these and other GIG projects can be found at www.globalinnovationgathering.org.
Celebrating ten years of *ad hoc international*!

A note from Christina Hübbers, Director, *nefa e. V.*

“*ad hoc international* is a magazine that aims to convey knowledge in a compact and simple form, provide food for thought, create new linkages and foster social engagement.” These were the words of *ad hoc* founder Ines Wolfslast ten years ago, formulating our publication’s mission in the first issue. Although originally designed as an internal medium for the association itself, it soon became clear that demand for our topics and approaches existed outside the network as well. An external audience developed quickly, and with great dedication and volunteer engagement we have successfully published 16 issues of *ad hoc* since. In each issue, we share diverse perspectives alongside practical alumni experiences on a range of global issues. We are proud of that. On behalf of the *nefa* network, I would like to sincerely thank all of our editors-in-chief, editors, and authors who have contributed to our magazine’s success.
ad hoc international (ad hoc) is a magazine on international perspectives published by the Network for International Affairs (nefia). Authors share their practical knowledge and experiences of global relevance with the aim of fostering thought and discussion.

nefia is the alumni organisation of former cohorts of the Mercator Fellowship for International Affairs and the former Postgraduate Program in International Affairs, with the purpose of maintaining contact after the fellowship period and nurturing professional networks. We address topics of global relevance by sharing practical and expert knowledge through events and publications. As a Mercator Fellowship partner, we support current fellowship holders in the planning and execution of their projects.

→ Demonstrating with their phones: tens of thousands take to the streets for an independent justice system in Poland, July 2017.