



IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, PLEASE CONTACT DEMOCRACY !

A MANIFESTO FOR STRENGTHENING EUROPEAN DIVERSITY

CAN?DO!

IMPRINT

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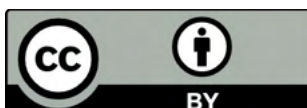
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CONTENT

A. DEMOCRACY – A JUMP INTO THE UNKNOWN

The Focus: Living Together	05
The Metaphor: A Sailing ship	08
The Voice of Democracy in Europe	11
Helpful Words and Art	14
Beauty – Conceivability – Consciousness – Cultivation	
Differentiation – Empty Space – Grace – Hope	
One-Ness – Responsibility – Unforeseen – Uniqueness	

B. GLIMPSES OF HOW TO LIVE DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE 40

Along migration routes – Diverse voices from Europe	41
NGO Young Lives Foundation from Türkiye: In a Nutshell	44
NGO Young Lives Foundation from Türkiye: Meaningful Youth Engagement	45
University of Thessaly, Greece: Teaching and learning democracy...on foot	46
University of Thessaly, Greece: Am I a democratic educator?	47
NGO Arca di Noé from Italy: The voice of participation	42
NGO Arca di Noé from Italy: A new narrative through participatory video	43
NGO VIA Bayern from Germany: The Culturatorium	51
NGO interpunktionen from Germany: The Village Talk	54
NGO Kista Folkhogskola from Sweden: Stockholmspalavern	56
NGO Kista Folkhogskola from Sweden: Kista folk high school	58

C. STARTING THE JOURNEY AGAIN 60

Be part of it: A letter to European democracy	61
A new beginning: Being in the World	64

D. ANNEX 66

Approach and development of the manifesto	67
Bibliography	69

A. DEMOCRACY –

A JUMP

INTO

THE UNKNOWN

THE FOCUS: LIVING TOGETHER

Democracy is not a thing – we can not have or own it; democracy is not simply a technical set of rules and regulations to be installed. The management of things and beings is important, but leads to the liberal-capitalist assumption that democracy could be run like a company generating added value for all – a good brand to be consumed, without asking too much about content. This fosters a very passive understanding of democracy: we should only be consumers and want those responsible for democracy to deliver goods; an understanding in which values, diversity and dealing with conflicts are excluded in favor of 'neutral' (often called to be 'rational') decisions without alternative. In this way democracy would be regarded as something that real experts should take into their hands – not the people, but smart technocrats who take informed decisions – indeed a quite authoritarian shift eliminating the diversity of voices. Governments and also a good number of people follow this problematic idea in Europe increasingly – from neo-liberal turns of the 1990s to libertarian shifts unleashing the forces of the market again – this has not led to more satisfaction.

The frustration about governments in Europe grows as they are unable to deliver the desired goods and are confronted with multiple crises like a shift in international order, war and a range of ecological and environmental problems; migration shows the inability of Europe to hold up human rights while at the same time turning into a fortress for the privileged ones. Populists, especially right-wing populists, take up this frustration and convert suppressed bad feelings into their extreme forms. They are operating with strong right/wrong and good/bad distinctions and claim that they would be

the real democrats uttering all those opinions forbidden by the 'elites' who are to be generally distrusted. They claim to re-enter diversity, but at the same time have an absolutist idea about their own values which mostly go hand in hand by wanting to exclude all those weaker ones that are not deemed to be part of the 'people' (migrants, members of the LGBTQI+ community, people with disabilities and older people). This is another authoritarian shift oppressing diversities: those who cannot be subsumed under the profit-oriented system and those who cannot be pressed into normative moral schemes are excluded; they seem to be a danger to the wish for control.

This manifesto tries to take another angle; it suggests to regard democracy not as an answer, but a question that is posed to all of us: "the question of the democracy to come might take the following form, among others: what is 'living together'?" (Derrida 2005, p. 12). A fundamental question that shows that the idea of democracy is directly linked to what it means to be a human being, to form a community of difference. A question that cannot be answered once and for all; a question that calls all of us to responsibility again and again. A question that begins with us, the neighborhood and ranges up to the complex construct like 'Europe'. In this way, it wants to foster what has recently been termed 'radical democracy', in the sense of the Latin word *radix*/root, trying to fundamentally go back to what democracy could mean for human beings in their limitedness and fragility. 'Radical democracy' normatively means strengthening the roots of democracy which are diversity, inclusiveness, active participation and freedom.

“How do we want to live together in Europe?”

Let's look at the different components of this question in the light of radical democracy:

“How do”

These two words remind us to make the enterprise of answering the question of democracy concrete; the ‘how do’ asks for a frame in which this can happen. One answer is to install, strengthen, and facilitate spaces of daily interaction where diverse people come together. This can be activities in daily public spaces, busses, community centers – spaces that are safe enough to talk about diversity and conflicts; often it is helpful to add a creative and tangible element, doing something together, cooperating and realizing that the question of democracy is not abstract, but can be felt and touched with others.

“we”

Democracy is never for others, it is for us. This is why the question of democracy is constantly posed in different contexts: how do we deal with the ‘here and now’ in a given group? And, more importantly: who are we, how closed or open are we? In our context, does Europe mean the European Union, the continent, all those that feel European? ‘We’ poses the question of openness: who can be part of the we, where are the limits (of time, complexity, energy). Which consequences do ‘we’ accept when drawing lines to others? Should we regard the global community, should we even include animals and things as we see that nature itself reacts in climate change and needs new forms of giving it a unique voice and species are becoming extinct due to human actions? To extend the limits of ‘we’ is part of expanding democracy.

“want”

Democracy does not prescribe how we should live. The freedom to start from one's personal values and essential needs is key to democracy. What we want is often linked to emotions. This dimension of democracy is underrated and at the same time abused by populists, stirring up negative emotions to the extreme. We can positively appreciate what we really want and need and thus strengthen the value-basis of democracy. Appreciation is the motivation and inspiration to be creative for new paths in the future.

“to live”

Democracy is not simply about knowledge, better arguments or the best analysis. Democracy links itself to life, it respects biographies, dreams, aspirations of human beings who are born and will die in their uniqueness. Thus, democracy is an activity, it cannot be taught but has to be done, experienced, felt. Doing democracy means granting a fulfilled life to all – this begins with our daily actions and decisions. To take responsibility for democracy means to take responsibility for the unfolding of life itself. To protect this very essence of democracy, a constitution with human rights safeguards human life as a non-negotiable absolute.

"together"

Democracy deals with diversities, it cannot be done alone or by some. Together we live on this planet and have to find out how we constantly balance majority and minority, privilege and discrimination, participation and decision; together also means positively regarding value conflicts as the essence of dealing with each other. Together in diversity we can construct the contexts and arrangements required to deal with each other peacefully. This also means that violence is not acceptable as it enters a win/lose logic for living together; instead, it is acknowledged that living together involves many tensions, dilemmas and often painful decisions with the hope to find better answers in the future.

"in Europe?"

The great promise of the project of the European Union is and was to fulfill the aspiration of combining unity with diversity. Different cultures, languages, traditions to be united on one continent. The different waves of expanding the European Union posed this question more and more, but also led to a crisis: is the common market all that unites us? What about those currently undermining the idea of the European Union? What about countries currently excluded? Where does Europe start and where does it end? How can Europe remain open and protected at the same time? What would a European democracy in diversity mean in the end?

EXPERIENCE: "Until the light breaks through..."

Try to experience the unknown, the uncontrollable in yourself and the other.
Find new ways to feel the beauty of not knowing, not categorizing or controlling
your thoughts or interpretations of the other – a democratic experience!

Sit together with one other person and look into each others' eyes directly.
Have a paper and pencil ready and spontaneously draw the other person with your
weaker hand for one minute without stopping the pencil and without looking on the paper.
Do this mutually with two or three other persons – do not try to make a good drawing –
let your pencil circle according to what you spontaneously see in the other person.
In the group collect words that came to mind when doing this activity of exposing yourself
to the other; find counter-words for orientation and security and discuss them together:
How do they foster or endanger a concept of radical democracy?

The philosopher Simone Weil said, we should not start with understanding, but
"gazing until the light breaks through" (Weil 1952, p. 174).

THE METAPHOR: A SAILING SHIP

To get a better grip and understanding on what has been discussed above, it is helpful to use a symbol as a way to further explore and creatively expand on the notion of democracy.

Democracy is a sailing ship. This metaphor implies that it can be built, has a certain appearance and stability, people can look at it and enter it. In Europe we have different sailing ships, yet one thing is the same: sailing can only be learned under the insecure conditions of waves and weather on the open ocean. Depending on changing and opposing winds, it is necessary to take sharp turns, seeing no land on the horizon but keeping up the hope for continuing life's path together. People in different nations have different sailing experiences and explore different routes.

This means that democracy is on the one hand active – the construction of a stable sailing ship and the preservation of this construction is essential so that people can come together as a community in a safe space and start a journey together; at the same time democracy is 'passive' when the journey begins – like a sailing ship it has no pre-fixed plan for the future, but is reactive to changing winds and conditions on water; it needs guidance and governance as well as the equal inclusion of all on the ship to participate. Legitimate leadership of a captain is needed in representing the community, but it can be changed over time. Radically, democracy tries to leave the (male) domination over the world as an object – when sailing around, the surface of the sea is preserved and the crew has to be prepared for the changing winds. Often this is seen in a negative way that there is no clear route for the future; in a positive sense, being a sailing ship is very close to life itself: what will be tomorrow, the future, that which will happen, is in principle never clear. Democracy is the "promise for the future" (Derrida 2006, p.306) to take new turns to

whatever might happen. This call of insecurity shows us that life as such is never safe. Democracy cannot be guaranteed. There are always *events* and a future we cannot calculate.

In this sense sailing ships can be stable, but they do not have a 'grounding' – there is no fixed anchor to cling to, no truth, power or religion that provides a safe haven and reason for action (Derrida 2005, p. 121 ff). Democracy is fragile – insecurity is the one member always being on board. Some thinkers define this radical perspective on democracy as an "institutionalised insecurity" (Lefort 1988, p. 19). Democrats know that each decision is contingent and could be revised – by new insights, new political options or new governments after elections. In democracy there is no longer a locus of power unifying society and the state in a 'secure' way. As Claude Lefort puts it: "Power was embodied in the prince, and it therefore gave society a body (...) This model reveals the revolutionary and unprecedented feature of democracy. The locus of power becomes an empty place, (...) it cannot be occupied – it is such that no individual and no group can be consubstantial with it – and it cannot be represented" (Lefort 1988, p.19). Democracy is not a static term but by its very nature signifies an ongoing process.

Democracy is open to the winds of change, for looking at what is unexpected, which means to become open to human life as we find it around us. To respond to these events also means trying to do *justice* to whatever happens around us; responding to it, being responsible to the human as such. To do justice is beyond right and wrong; justice is the responsible answer to the call of the *other* – beyond what we had in mind. Jacques Derrida puts it this way: "There is no justice except to the degree that some *event* is possible which, *as event*, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so

forth. Justice as the experience of absolute alterity is unrepresentable.” (Derrida 1992, p. 27). This is the most radical thought on linking democracy especially as a form of life to justice beyond formal, institutional and legal procedures. Democracy becomes an experience, a form of life which means that we constantly respond to insecurity, trying to do justice to any situation we encounter, accepting the dilemmas of values and yet being ready to do the jump into action.

Turning back to the metaphor, sailing ships will take up those in open water who do not have a ship or cannot swim and make them part of their community. In such a way, the sailing ship of democracy embodies freedom combined with responsibility. Sometimes it might even be necessary to take down the sails to protect the ship – and take out the paddles and all have to work hard to continue the path. Concretely: the *event* of migration is exactly this call for a response, a responsibility to do justice to other human beings and not exclude them in the name of a pre-determined and secure plan which they seem to disturb.

Here we can see the essential tension, the radical dilemma of democracy: human beings, in order to be able to go forward, aim normally always at an “uncertainty avoidance” (Hofstede 2003). At the same time, it is clear that human life itself is fragile and full of uncertainties. The metaphor of the sailing ship shows how democracy tries to balance the wish for security with respect to fundamental insecurity of human life itself: “Uncertainty about the future is a basic fact of human life with which we try to cope through the domains of technology, law and religion. (...) the borderline between defending ourselves against uncertainties and accepting them is fluid; many of our defenses intended to create certainty do not really do so in an objective sense, but they allow us to sleep peacefully” (Hofstede 2003, p. 146). Democrats need the stable ship of democracy to start – and the ship of democracy needs democrats to keep it on its uncertain route, react to the winds, protect and maintain it. Democracy in this sense is a daily experience. This sphere of democracy was originally formulated by reform pedagogue John

Dewey in the 1920s. His pivotal concept was that, in general, democracy should be based on experience in the sense of participation and inclusion of all in a setting of learning. This also means that we experience ourselves on the ship as a ‘laboratory of democracy’, in which we can experience how to deal with inclusion, exclusion, prejudice, conflicts and decisions. We become politicized when we explore different options with others in protected spaces; we find a balance between our values and those of others and recognize conflict as a chance for creative democratic development. Hannah Arendt puts it in this way: “To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates human beings at the same time” (Arendt 1958, p. 52).

Autocrats do not like this idea of a community of human sailors exploring the unknown. Those who want to stop the ship of democracy (opposing winds or enemies from within), will use the anchor, trying to re-ground it. Authoritarian rulers and populists try to do this as they cannot accept the freedom of a moving, unforeseeable and also fragile democracy. They want security, restriction and control – focusing on the *same*, fixed identity instead of the *other*. Then the sailing ship is still there, but its active beauty and participation of all when sailing is lost. In a way it will auto-destruct itself when no longer in use because it is not flexible to react when winds and situations on the water change – it will fall apart, also because most likely those prevented from sailing will no longer take care and responsibility for this dead object.

In Europe we are in a situation in which storm is so strong that symbolically different sailing ships have formed a strong circle, like a fortress. This prevents others, especially migrants from entering ‘our waters’ in the middle – literally it also prevents them to have stable sailing ships that allow them to connect as a community and be at the same eye level as the ‘established democracies’; migrants are not in a productive surrounding of democratic insecurity, but

often have to live in despair and chaos, literally without any ship on the open sea. The term *migrants* marks them like an object – the individual names, the fate we have to respond to in order to do justice, is lost completely. They are drowning as the unknown. Jacques Rancière (Rancière 1998) analyzes that those without a share are not even heard as such – their voices are not messages, but only disturbing noise – they do not have a part in this kind of democracy – no wonder human rights fail in the face of dealing with these human beings exactly in moments when they would be needed most.

This endangers also us on the sailing ships: if the ship of democracy follows too much with the wind of extremists, it might be smashed on land – if it tries to be too defensive against enemies of democracy, it might break at the anchor. Enemies within can also be those sleeping – if too many do that, there is no taking responsibility, giving response to the changing

winds. The European sailing ships themselves are locked and cannot take any turns anymore. Here democracy is also in the danger of auto-destruction by becoming inflexible, a hard shell that cannot move anymore and also takes the freedom and inspiration from its people.

The eternal question for the sailing ship of democracy is how to balance the acceptance of insecurity and fragility (which opens up to life – also and especially vulnerable life) with the need for protection of the ship itself. Being open but not naive; being prepared but not excluding. The more diverse the community of sailors is, the better for having a diversity of values representing creative possibilities of reaction; at the same time, this needs a readiness for dealing with tensions and conflicts, keeping open an endless debate for the sake of integrating all of the voices.

EXPERIENCE: Our values on board

The diversity of values makes us creative on the sailing ship. They are not abstract or a doctrine from above. They rather grow out of our biographical resources and lived wisdom.

In a group, let everyone write down a proverb from childhood in their mother tongue.

Share these without explanation, just listening to the different voices and languages.

Then ask the whole group to fold a sailing ship together from a large piece of paper.

Invite small groups to explain the proverbs and help each other derive one or two positive values from them (even if the proverb might be negative – try to find its essential and original positive wisdom). Write each of the values on separate papers. In a round, let everyone place their values into the paper ship.

Discuss whether there is a limit to the number of values – are there essential ones? Which of the values might be in tension when decisions on the sailing ship are taken? How could we productively deal with these conflicts between values – respecting them but doing what is most helpful in the moment? Who might have more power than others to push his or her values against others in the current situation in Europe?

THE VOICE OF DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

Liberal democracy has strong historical ties to the Enlightenment era and capitalism; as Marx and Engels already analyzed almost 200 years ago, this can have devastating effects: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (Marx / Engels 1848). In other words: individual freedom can lead to the atomization of society in which all collective links are destroyed. For some this might be good, for many it is problematic: not all human beings have equal chances and equal access to live their dreams. Strong, privileged (male, white, Western, able, rich) ones unfold their freedom at the cost of weaker ones.

This is why human beings also have a strong sense for the need of commonality: the value of equality means that as human beings we are not born with fundamental differences and this should be respected – by providing rules and regulations that are the same for all. Equality originally points to the fact that we all have the equal right to live our lives decently. It is a collective value that sets boundaries and links us to each other. Origins of this value are in the trade unions trying to collectively confront the owners of capital and property to achieve better life conditions. In modern society there are a number of measures trying to foster the value of equality: insurances, an incremental tax system, security belts, wearing Corona masks and compulsory education are examples that try to make human beings equal and avoid that privileged ones to live their freedom at the cost of others. It is mostly privileged people that see the value of equality as a restriction of their

individual life; for others, equality is the only chance to have a decent life and unfold their personal freedom. One example from gender-related practices are shelter houses for women in anonymous places. Men are excluded from these places – only in this way these women can have security as a basis for their freedom. This is an example of how traces of radical democracy focusing on vulnerability and fragility of human life are put into practice.

Living together is linked to physical spaces, to building, design and architecture. Also here, we can see a gender-related issue which must be kept in mind: Anna Heringer, a German architect working internationally with clay and mud, terms it in this way: "The constant driving for height, efficiency, control, and rationalization, but also the fascination for the novelty and the excessive use of technology – all typically male characteristics – must be brought into a healthy balance with intuition, empathy, care, and compassion for fellow human beings and nature. The male-dominated approach hasn't just led us towards the overexploitation of resources, and correspondingly climate emergency, but also towards social injustice, through a lack of empathy and emphasis of results over process. (Heringer 2024, p. 130).

Strengthening European democracy as a whole is a task that is linked to the question of how Europe will manage to find a balance between unity and diversity; between the need to take position and not excluding others; the challenge to remain open without giving up identity. It is basically a question about upholding democracy and how democracy can give inspiration to the people of this continent. Increasingly, democracy is under pressure: according to the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index

2023 (EIU, 2023), democratization has recently suffered further setbacks. Less than 8% of the world's population live in a full democracy, while almost 40% live under authoritarian rule. The global Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend. At the same time, the report shows empirically that democracy itself is in no way a guarantee to prevent global crises such as climate change, or settle international conflicts and wars. Democracies open up enormous opportunities to their citizens, and at the same time, they do not always provide decisive and quick answers to challenges. So democracy is no longer the only attractive narrative for the future as authoritarian networks are building strong ties to secure advantage of the few against the majority of the people, as Anne Applebaum shows in her impressive report *Autocracy, Inc.* (see Applebaum 2024): authoritarian rulers are linking up internationally and secure land, capital and resources with the help of companies and investment organisations.

Existing democracies are realizing that their means to confront these tendencies seem too weak to work in a world of crises and wars. How can we unlock ourselves from this dead-end path? How could another world be imagined in which the roots of democracy become live and vibrant again? How can we be inspired to see beyond the capitalist logic of economic objectivization? How can we go beyond what American thinker Frederic Jameson (Jameson 1994) said: "It is easier to imagine the end of the world, than to imagine the end of capitalism".

In today's world, where society is increasingly governed by automated economic systems and where democratic institutions risk becoming nothing more than technical tools for administration, it becomes vital to stop and reflect on the deeper forces that shape our common life. Hartmut Rosa uses the example of expecting the first snow of the year – always a magic moment for many – and completely uncontrollable: "Our relationship to snow reflects the drama of our relationship to the modern world as in a crystal ball. The driving cultural force of that form of life we call "modern" is the idea, the

hope and desire, that we can make the world controllable. Yet it is only in encountering the uncontrollable that we really experience the world. Only then do we feel touched, moved, alive." (Rosa 202, p. 2). Within this context, fiction – understood purely as an artistic form – reveals itself as a powerful response to philosophical thought experiments like the idea of "possible worlds." These imagined realities aren't just escapist fantasies. On the contrary, they are essential. Without the ability to imagine alternatives, our world risks becoming a closed loop, a space that only refers back to itself, measuring everything by its own limited standards. In that sense, artistic imagination offers a way out – a means of sensing what could exist beyond what already does. It might even be our strongest protection against the slow freezing of society into something entirely technocratic.

We are watching society shed its reflective and inward-looking functions, replacing them with fragmented and isolated behaviors. Yet art and literature are not luxury goods, nor are they mere tools for delivering a message. They are essential to human life. If we look to authoritarian regimes, when personal freedoms are severely restricted, there still remains a deep and widespread curiosity about what was being created, written, and thought – not just among elites, but among ordinary people. That interest may have expressed a fundamental human longing: to feel, to understand, to share. Even when freedom is absent, that desire lives on.

In most European countries, the situation is almost reversed. We are free to do nearly anything – but that same curiosity has faded. We live in a flood of information, and fewer people seem to care what others are reading or thinking. This gives rise to a troubling paradox: unlimited freedom, without a meaningful connection to others, becomes hollow. True freedom needs a counterpart – justice, belonging, dialogue – to take on real value. Literature helps provide that. It enables us to explore what reality could be, challenging the familiar and sparking new ideas. In this way, fiction becomes not just storytelling, but an act of imagination with ethical and social consequences. It invites us to ask who we

are, what kind of world we live in, and what kind of world we could create together.

Democracy, after all, was never meant to deliver perfect solutions. It was designed to generate options we can live with – ones that feel legitimate, fair, and possible to accept. But to make such choices, people must feel their lives have meaning. And part of that meaning comes from being able to speak with oneself – to recognize that we are complex, changing beings, not just collections of preferences, but strangers to ourselves. The fact that we're still figuring out who we are makes us interesting to ourselves. We must also understand the role of cultural exchange in shaping democratic life – especially when we are called to live alongside people we haven't chosen. When people from different parts of the world bring their stories and experiences to Europe, we get a fusion of perspectives. The European idea of equality – often abstract and general – needs to be understood to preserve the unique traits of each person. The goal isn't to erase difference, but to create a space where diverse experiences can meet and interact. We don't have to see each other as identical; we can see each other as surprising, enigmatic, frustrating, mysterious, scary, loveable – and universally inviolable. Such interest in others is a stronger defense of democracy than any formal rule. If everyone is forced to fit the same definition of "equal," we risk stripping away what makes us human. Radical democracy is born from living interactions – from real conversations where people meet and exchange thoughts.

Seen more broadly, democracy isn't just a decision-making tool. It is an empty space – a vessel waiting to be filled with human experience: with art, literature,

dialogue, and personal encounters. In those encounters, where we share our stories, hopes, and fears, a deeper understanding emerges – one that facts alone can't provide. What sustains democracy isn't just an increasing number of voices, but the space for real difference and complexity. That space shouldn't be reduced to media platforms or online noise. It lives in slow, thoughtful conversations – the kind that make democracy resilient, adaptable, and alive. There, we meet one another as full human beings, with emotions and imagination. We allow ourselves to be moved, to wonder, to change. We choose curiosity over certainty. And in that act – daring to face the unknown, the uncomfortable, the incomplete – we create something deeply human. For this reason, we must not let democracy be hijacked by speed, efficiency, or technical logic alone. A system that leaves no space for reflection risks erasing the lived experience of citizenship. We need an open space – a space no power can fully occupy – where memories, dreams, and imagined futures can be shaped together, again and again.

In its earliest form, democracy was not built for rulers. It was built as a space for shared speech and listening. Cultural theorist Homi Bhabha has described such a space as a "third space" – a realm where different cultures meet and influence one another, where new identities emerge. As Bhabha writes: "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew." (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37).

HELPFUL WORDS AND ART

We followed the idea of radical democracy – not in the sense of extremism, but in the literal meaning of *radical* as "root." We explored democracy by going back to its roots, asking what it truly means to live and act democratically as human beings. To express this, we used the metaphor of a sailing ship: a vessel that moves forward with imagination, openness, and collective direction. Just like such a ship needs wind and navigation, democracy needs art and literature – they help us imagine another world, make new possibilities conceivable, and open paths that logic cannot chart (compare Ruch 2019).

Our critique of capitalism, technocracy, and the illusion of security shows that we cannot recover the roots of democracy in Europe simply by definitions or programs. Instead, we need to engage in a process of poetic and aesthetic reflection: "Practices of art (...) contribute to (...) a new landscape of the visible, the sayable and the doable" (Rancière 2015, p. 149). That is why we offer twelve words as invitations to explore different aspects of radical democracy. Each word represents a different dimension of what it might mean to live democracy in Europe:

Beauty – Consciousness – Conceivability – Cultivation – Differentiation – Empty Space – Grace – Hope – One-ness – Responsibility – Unforeseen – Uniqueness.

Partners from Türkiye, Greece, Italy, Germany and Sweden enriched these words and developed symbols for each of them which were professionally drawn afterwards. Together they add meaning and depth to the following reflections.

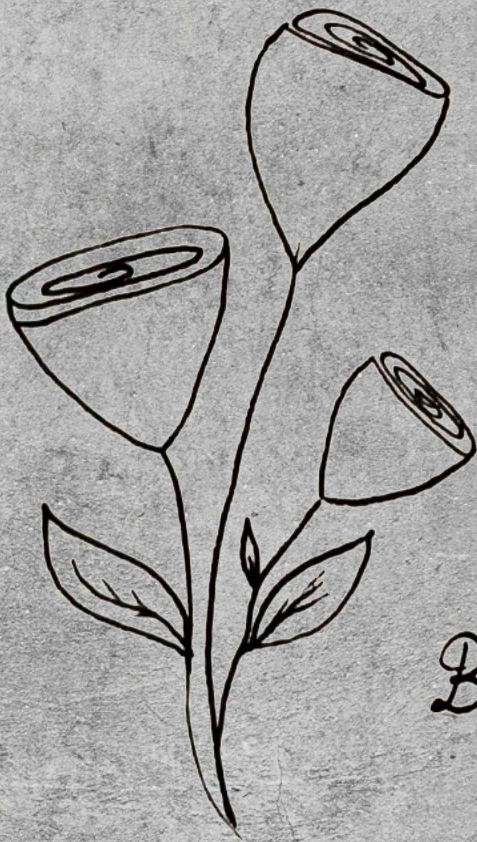
EXPERIENCE: Words for life

We need new kinds of words –
words that do not automatically make us fall into old,
predetermined patterns of thought.
Words that open space rather than closing it.
Words that loosen fixed meanings and spark creativity.
Words that allow us to encounter one another deeply as human beings.

Choose a few of the twelve words and let each person in a group pick one.
Form pairs and reflect openly: which associations come to mind?
Which hopes, inspirations or perhaps fears are connected to the word?
How might this word relate to democracy? Can it contribute something?
Could it become a part of your own life? Can you see that in the future?

Alternatively place each word in a different corner in the room.
Let small groups gather and reflect openly on the words –
after a while invite people to switch corners and share again.

Finish by gathering the whole group and sharing insights.
What surprising thoughts or emotional responses did the words bring up?
What new connections did you experience – with the words, and with each other?



Beauty can change
minds and relieve souls.

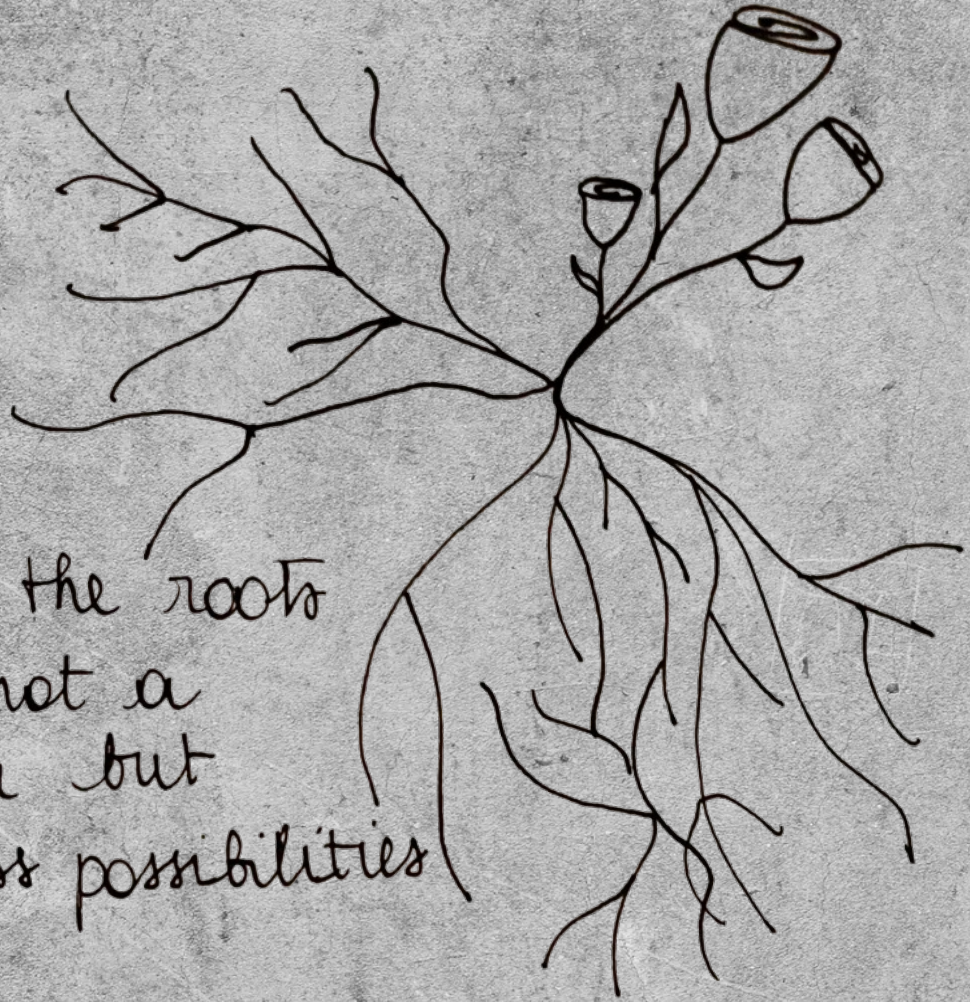
Beauty

Art and beauty stand today as critique of society's complete technocratic ossification. The last self-reflective, soul-searching capacities are being filtered out, leaving behind only atomized behaviors. Art and beauty are neither ends in themselves nor instruments for other purposes. They are essential in the deepest sense – vital to life. Their value is revealed in the fact that no culture has ever survived without the beautiful.

In a time when the mechanisms of society are increasingly reduced to a chain of automated procedures, and where the democratic structure is on the edge of becoming a mere apparatus of administration, we pause and reflect deeply on the fundamental forces that shape our shared reality. We move beyond the immediate – not through mere wishful thinking or escapism but through an intention that awakens hope, which is the opposite of passive waiting. We envision potential changes, contrasting with a fatalistic and runaway economy.

Our world risks collapsing into an unbearable arena – a public sphere that can only echo itself, pointing back at its own surface as the sole measure of truth. It is as though artistic imagination acts as a lifeline, a conduit through which our senses might open to what could be, rather than submitting to what already is. Beauty is the aesthetic aspect of a democracy unfolding new possibilities of being.

From the roots
rises not a
flower but
endless possibilities



Conceivability

It is only when freedom and justice are weighed against one another – when we allow them to define each other's limits – that they can evolve into social and historical values, values that allow us to shape a shared future. Literature's unique ability to conjure "conceivabilities" plays a decisive role in this process (*"conceivabilities" refers to the range of alternative ways of imagining the world – new possible realities or futures that we can conceive of*).

To bring forth such pathways, we focus on people who feel a sense of meaning in their lives. One way to experience meaning is through the true realization that one has something to say to oneself – that is, people who are also strangers to themselves, and therefore curious about themselves, who do not merely cultivate their own preferences but venture into that murky territory where we surrender ourselves to that which shapes us.

By allowing us to journey into the worlds of conceivabilities, into the undiscovered sides of reality, literature offers a dynamic force that challenges the status quo. It urges us to look beyond the obvious, to dare question established norms, and to make room for new ideas and dreams. In this way, fiction becomes not only an art form but also an ethical and existential act – one that provides an invaluable contribution to democracy. It invites dialogue, an ongoing reflection on what it means to be human and to live together in a world where not all answers are given in advance. It is crucial to remember that the democratic form of governance does not exist to generate theoretically optimal solutions, but to create solutions that are socially acceptable, bearable, legitimate, and possible to embrace.

The way
we see

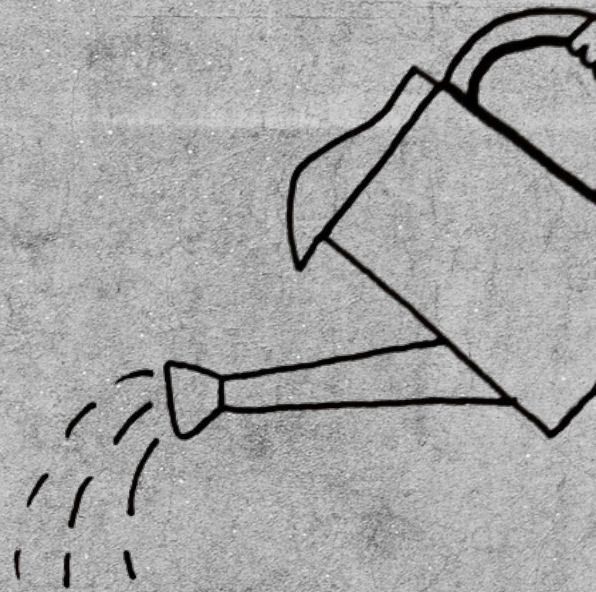


Consciousness

The formation of every human's consciousness is dependent on external frameworks, on order. In our civilization, the growing child is confronted with the machine's meaning-making. We actively and consciously create a distance between ourselves and nature's complex systems of plants and animals, which thereby become an otherness. Even though new science increasingly seems to contradict this idea, we are firmly anchored in a Newtonian clockwork world of cold, steel-like cause and effect. A child grows into a person among straight streets and trees planted in straight rows. Among perpendicular buildings placed at right angles to each other. And the child is expected to grow into a straight little line.

The model for human adulthood becomes the economy's expansion: an ego in constant enlargement. Growing, not through union but through acquisition. A distortion that ultimately severs us from the consciousness that we are part of all that is.

And yet, we seek our analogies for human change – for becoming, aging, and death – in nature. In budding trees, the falling leaves of autumn, or the thaw of early spring. Here we find a model for the complexity of human organisms, for the interaction of living beings. Here can we learn to connect with the feeling of being human in the same way that the sea is a sea or a tree is a tree. Here we can experience that democracy is more than a straight and efficient line – it is an interweaving of life-giving forces.



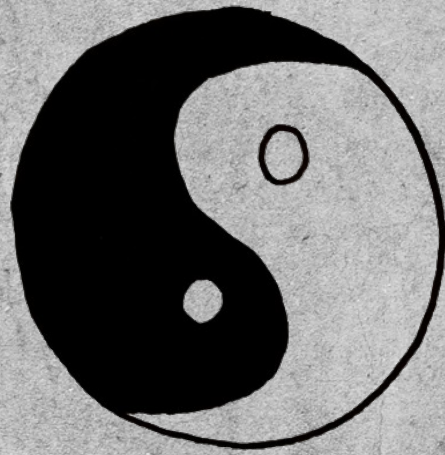
Farming good things
takes time

Cultivation

We dare to take the time to pause, to listen to our inner voices, and to allow every story, every thought, every feeling to grow and resonate with one another – to cultivate ourselves. This is our shared mission and our shared responsibility, a mission that requires courage, patience, and a belief that human experience will always be the strongest guarantee of a future where every individual has the chance to make their voice heard.

It is about safeguarding what is human in a world. It is by letting art, literature, and open dialogue play a central role in our societies that we can ensure democracy is not reduced to an empty vessel, but filled with life, creativity, and a constant striving for understanding. If we do not dare to pause, to question, and to listen – both to ourselves and to one another – we risk losing the democratic spirit, the irreplaceable potential in our shared encounters. This is not merely a theoretical matter, but a question of our common future, where each individual's experience and each new question contributes to a richer, more nuanced, and more vibrant democracy.

There is goodness in
every badness



There is badness in
every goodness

Differentiation

The diversity of the public sphere is a hallmark of democracy, and this diversity is not guaranteed by maximizing the number of “voices,” but by valuing differentiation among the voices as such. That is, by not accepting that the public sphere be identified solely with mass media and the internet. It is in humanity’s slow, deeply reasoned moments that we find the foundation for a democracy that is robust, flexible, and alive. Here, we meet each other as unique individuals, with our own experiences and emotions, and allow ourselves to be inspired by the creative potential that arises when we dare to ask questions rather than seek definitive answers. To question the established, to dare face the uncontrollable, is an act that not only enriches our intellectual discourse but also strengthens the common bond between people.

Democracy can become trapped in a rigid, mechanical structure where decisions are made without room for dialogue and where traditional values are crowded out, by fast impersonal processes. This eliminates the living, ever-changing dimension of citizenship. If we view democracy from a broader perspective, it becomes clear that it is not merely a mechanism for decision-making, but an empty vessel that is ready to be filled with the full diversity of human experience.

Alle sind
willkommen

tutti* sono
benvenuti*

DEMOCRACY

مرحباً بك

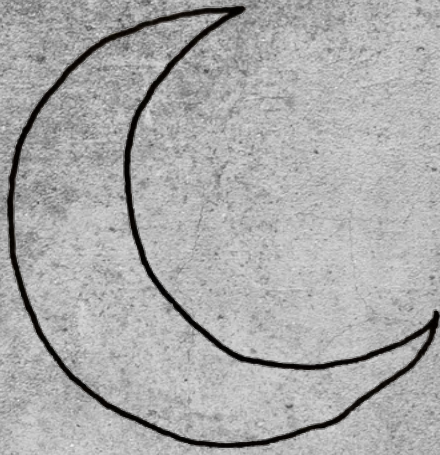
Alla är
välkomna

Empty Space

At democracy's inception, there was no place for the rulers – only an open space for conversation and discussion. Today, we urgently need an Empty Space where new ideas about how to live together constantly can be created and negotiated. At democracy's inception, there was also the "stadion." A building distinguished by having one short side open. An architectural detail that is far more than a practical solution – It carries deep symbolic resonance. A stadion implies that something exists beyond the space itself – a landscape, a sanctuary, a direction. The runner moves toward an ever-present horizon; it is not a trap, but an expression of motion, aspiration, and freedom. In the stadion, the human is part of the cosmos, not separate from it. They compete, but in unity with the gods, the audience, and the earth. It is a place of recognized individuality in interplay, not of exploitation. In Rome, something else later emerged: the "arena," circular and enclosed. The audience surrounds, power encloses – eyes everywhere, but no way out. The arena creates submission, struggle, not participation. A place where the law is suspended to display its power – where power is both judge, audience, and creator of violence's ritual.

Today's conversations in modern culture seem to have moved from the stadion to the arena. In all their variety, they are now saturated with polarized positions, charged with emotions of passion, struggle, hate, love, compassion, contempt, fear, hope, worry... How does the lack of an empty space affect us?

We need a space – an empty space – that cannot be occupied by anyone (governing bodies, media, economic interests, political agendas...). A space where shared, specific, or unique experiences and imagined worlds can be condensed and renegotiated anew in a mutual, unending process of learning.



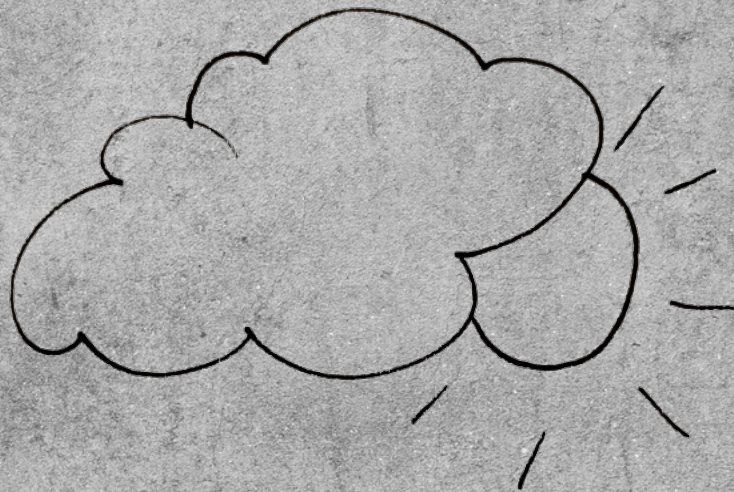
How gracefully you
let go things
not meant for you

Grace

Is it only when we face the imperfect, what rationality cannot describe, that we can bring grace into our lives? Because if we look beyond the shallow answers provided by manuals on how to think, move, or avoid the inevitable – what do we actually know? How do we know we are marrying the right person? That we're choosing the right school for our children? That this particular bank will manage our pension funds in the best way? We have to make nearly all life-defining choices based on "not knowing".

But no one can write a manual on how to live well, to bring grace into our lives. And it's precisely that which stirs the fundamental question that continuously occupies our minds. Paradoxically, the impossibility of answering that question opens the very space needed to discover ways to live well. It is in that gap that all disciplines fall short, where architecture doesn't fit its inhabitants, where economics isn't based on scarcity, where religion cannot be explained by its followers, and where technology functions far beyond its own principles. It is in that gap that it becomes evident that being human is an art. It is, in fact, in that gap where life's important events unfold... and where we find meaning and grace.

Democracy tries to leave this gap open – never to be too sure about its decisions and answers, always recognizing that things could be different tomorrow, always closely listening to life and its unforeseeable events.



The things we
look for...

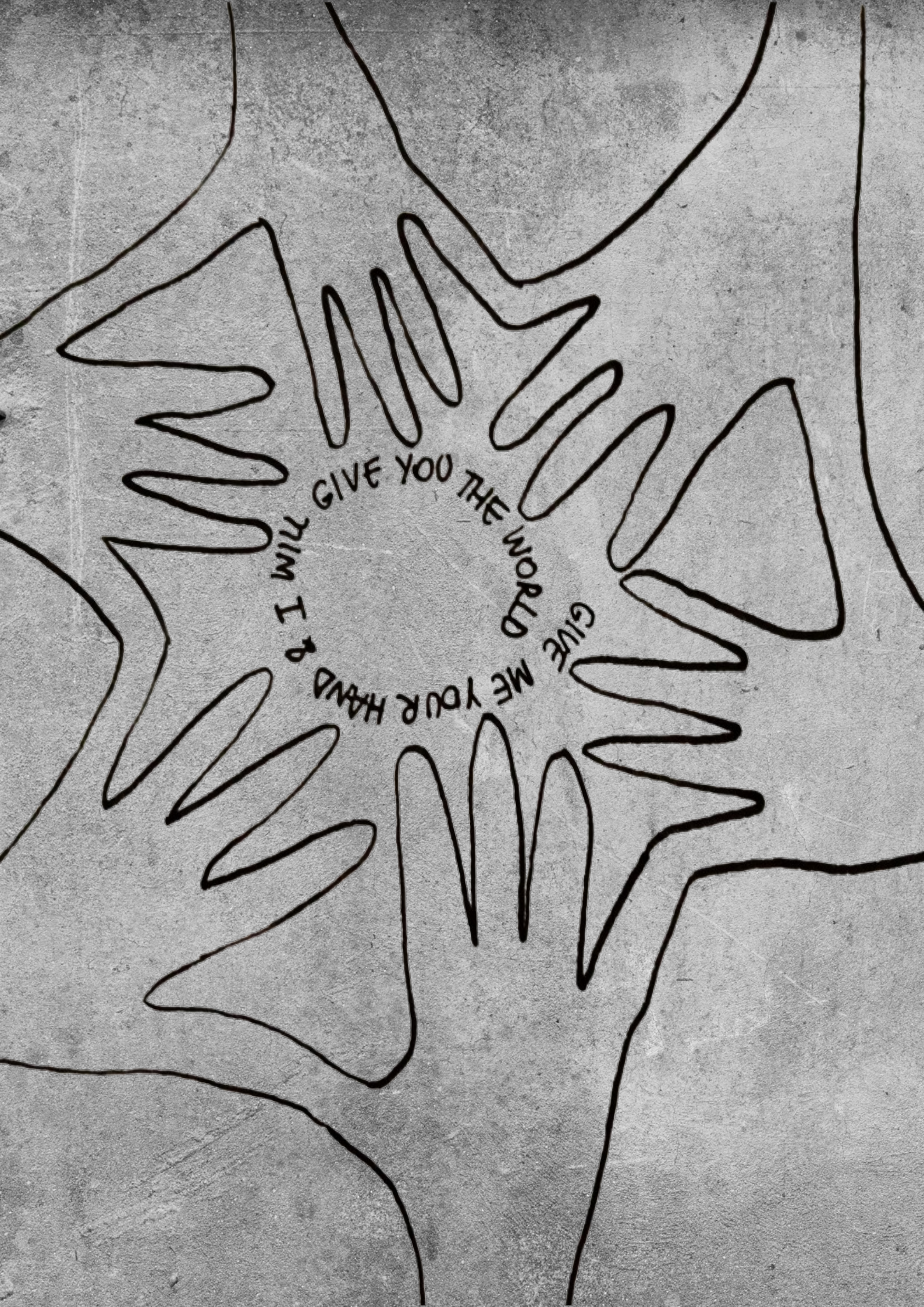
Hope

Hope is a force which is being able to transform and change things. Hope opens up new ways of seeing the world, for in the end, hope – wrenched from reality by denying it – is a form in which truth reveals itself. Without hope, the very idea of truth would scarcely be conceivable, and it would be the greatest untruth of all to, after acknowledging existence as flawed, present it as truth merely because it has been acknowledged.

Hope does not care about the logic of the world as it is. Hope is carried by the belief that everything can change radically. As a descendant of magic – which once separated the sacred from the ordinary and sought to keep the former pure – hope now represents an autonomous sphere in which the logic of the world as it is does not apply. Hope therefore insists on the right to be different. In doing so, it opens a space of possibilities in which we – as through an experience that goes beyond our everyday life – gain a glimpse of a higher truth.

Hope lies beyond all profane instrumental rationality, it illuminates a possible world beyond what currently exists.

Hope connects to democracy: democracy does not insist on a pre-fixed hope, but promises to be ever open and creative for a better future. Democracy is based on hope for a peaceful living together as human beings without being too sure to have found the truth on how to do that.



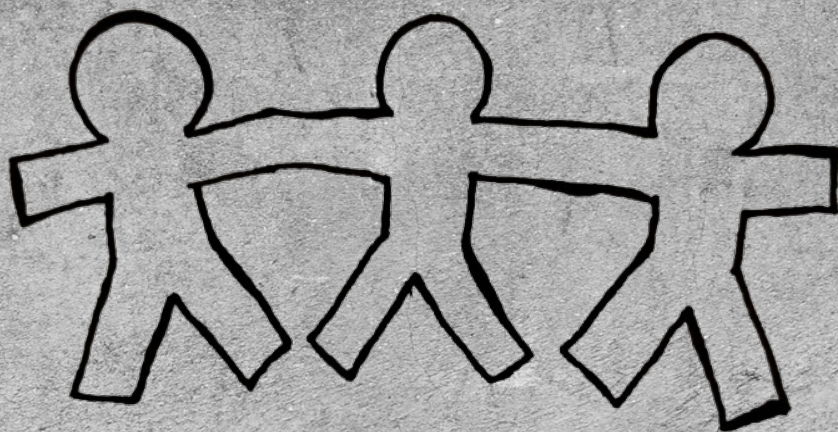
A hand-drawn starburst graphic on a textured, greyish background. The starburst is composed of several elongated, pointed shapes radiating from a central circle. The central circle contains the text "GIVE ME YOUR HAND & I WILL GIVE YOU THE WORLD" written in a circular path. The drawing is done in a simple, sketchy style with black outlines.

GIVE ME YOUR HAND & I WILL GIVE YOU THE WORLD

One-ness

The world is not a world of sameness, but of manifold difference. The challenge is to articulate the one-ness of such a world. But instead it is easier for us to imagine the end of the world, to summon dystopian visions, than to envision new ways of living together? We often view the human being as having a fixed nature – capable of art, science, and technology – and imagine that the people of the future will be just like us, only with more gadgets or more advanced tools. This is an illusion: we universalize our own way of living and that makes it hard to imagine anything other than ourselves. That, precisely, is the problem: we can easily picture everything collapsing, but we struggle to think beyond our current cultural form. Yet this world is not the globe of corporate finance, nor of international telecommunications, nor of “the West.” If we regard identity as a kind of fixed core that defines who we are independently of the world around us, identity risks becoming an *attribute* – something one *has*, something that belongs to the individual, like a possession or a right. It is also something that can be threatened or “stolen,” which often leads people to feel the need to defend their identity against others. This is the logic of the modern nation-state: every citizen is expected to be like every other citizen – not in individuality, but in obligations (the word *responsibility* is rarely used) and rights. The state demands sameness to make a social contract of equality possible. It does not encourage difference or diversity. But within this framework, identity is reduced to something static and bounded, defined in opposition – a “we” set against a “them.”

But if you and I and everyone else were already the same, what would we have to talk about? What kind of conversation could we possibly have? Only by bringing different things to the table – experiences, observations, skills – can these become something shared. The very word “community,” derived from the Latin *com* (“together”) and *munus* (“gift”), means not only “living together” but rather “giving together.” We belong to communities because each of us, in our difference, has something to give. Identity in community is therefore fundamentally relational. We are who we are by virtue of where we stand in the mutual give-and-take of collective life.



Responsibility
is shared

Responsibility

It can be argued that defending human responsibility based on another linguistic understanding would provide a more positive framework than defending rights. It would describe a weaving together rather than a separation. Responsibility opens the door to reciprocity and care and strengthens relationships. Rights, on the other hand, risk leading us in a state of conflict and establish boundaries between us.

The major European languages' have a tendency to divide the world into binary opposites. This might help to explain why words like responsibility, duty, virtue, and morality have acquired such negative connotations – they are perceived as opposing rights. That is, they are seen as threats to something being taken away from us. In several other languages from indigenous cultures, however, such words express a living relationship where "responsibility" signifies care for everything with which we are in relation.

Responsibility, in contrast to a right, can be describe as objective and independent of our will, even if the world is such that we sometimes face situations where it is impossible to fulfill all our responsibilities simultaneously. For example, we may have a responsibility to care for our family while also having a responsibility to fulfill our work obligations or help someone in need. When these responsibilities conflict, it forces us to make an ethical choice and, consequently, to neglect one responsibility in favor of another. This is the tragic dimension of ethical action.

The degree of social unrest and disharmony in a society can be measured by how often people face such conflicts. In a society where individuals frequently face such choices, there exists a deeper structural imbalance. In a harmonious society, conflicts between different responsibilities would be rare, as the social structure would be built on the recognition of unavoidable responsibilities and the meeting of basic human needs.

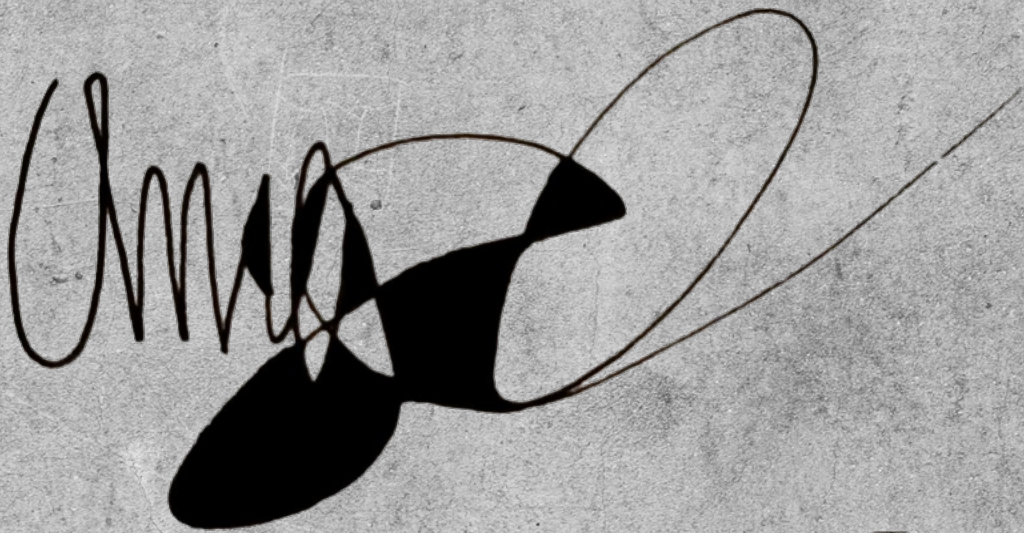
In such societies, the relationship to other people, nature, or the social context is not a domain for competition but a foundation for collective life. This awareness - that every action impacts the whole - brings us closer to democratic ideals of equality, community, and care for one another.



Unforeseen

The word 'idiot' didn't originally mean a generally stupid person at all. We have misunderstood it in its later interpretations. Once it pointed to someone attuned to the unforeseen, rather than confined to the expected? The suffix "-iot" means roughly "the place where one comes from." For example, a Cypriot comes from Cyprus, a patriot (Greek "patéras") comes from the fatherland. The word "id" means the unreflective self, as opposed to "ego", often used to denote the reflective self. So "idiot" would mean an unreflective person who comes from themselves. In a similar way, the Chinese wisdom saying 'a wise person is without ideas' suggests a person who imagines the world with an attitude that precedes all concepts, where the awareness of the unknown and the unforeseen comes before the awareness of the known and the foreseen, where the image of the world is not adapted to preconceived ideas.

Like, for example, Prince Lev Mysjkin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* – a figure who moves through the world with disarming openness, untouched by irony or self-interest. He meets others without filters, responding not to roles or expectations, but to the unforeseen. His presence unsettles because it cannot be placed – he refuses to adapt to the logic of power or performance. He is an *idiot* in the ancient, sacred sense: one who comes from within, without preconceived ideas about the world, unshaped by ideology, unafraid of vulnerability. An impossible figure for a rational age – and precisely therefore, a necessary one to be rediscovered: democracy opening up to a future that is not pre-determined, but open to always new and open encounters of all human beings.



ONLY THIS TIME
PLACE
FACE
SPACE

Uniqueness

The European idea of equality, in its abstract and general sense, eliminates the individuality and uniqueness each person carries. It is about finding a common space where different experiences can meet without losing their distinct character – a place where cultural exchange happens between people who need not see each other as equals in every situation, but rather as interesting, enigmatic, worthy of respect, moving, irritating, frightening, and inviolable in a universal sense. Where interaction occurs in all its disorder and unpredictability. That kind of interest in others is a more reliable guarantee of democracy than any fully formulated idea that everyone must be made – or forced – to embrace, leading to assimilation.

We consider how cultural exchange between people contributes to the shaping of our democratic reality – a reality which, among other things, entails living alongside people we have not chosen to live with. When people from all over the world come to any of the European countries and share their unique experiences of different forms of community and their diverse stories, a dynamic encounter of unique perspectives takes place.

A person who in every context must categorize all their traits under the label of “equal” risks no longer having a face to show to others. It is this concrete and dynamic interaction – where people dare to meet and speak with one another – that forms the true foundation of a living democratic system beyond assimilation.

B. GLIMPSES OF

HOW TO LIVE

DEMOCRACY

IN EUROPE



ALONG MIGRATION ROUTES – DIVERSE VOICES FROM EUROPE

Europe is not only a collection of member states; it is a common living space with shared challenges that pose the question of how to reform and re-vitalize democracy; especially the issue of migration (in the context of war, enduring neo-colonial exploitation and climate change) asks universal questions to 'Europe': how does Europe as a whole react to those challenges in a democratic way? What is our contribution to global responsibility? Which good practices can we internationalize? It becomes increasingly clear that solutions will not be found in the dominant discourses: "While European states have maintained a neoliberal approach, which has been unable to contest far-right backlashes, social movement organizations have struggled for social justice at the local scale" (Pajnik et al. 2025, p. 175).

Our partner organisations from countries along several entry and migration routes through Europe bring distinct strengths and best practices, enriching the project with a multitude of insights. This diversity encourages the emergence of innovative solutions that are responsive to a wider range of societal, cultural, and economic contexts with a focus on inclusion and diversity. We want to revitalize Europe as the vision of 'unity in diversity' which corresponds with our approach to analyzing democracy as a concept.

Below you can find very diverse voices from inspired persons working in institutions in Türkiye, Greece, Italy, Germany and Sweden. All of them share the reality of working with vulnerable groups – often human beings having come to one of these European countries not by free decision, but by the fact that life in their origin countries was no longer bearable. These human beings are challenging 'Europe' as a fixed concept and at the same time enrich it by posing the question of living diversity; they pose pressing questions concerning a shared world with freedom and equality for all and they bring impulses on how to live together more peacefully in this world.

Our partner organizations are connected in having understood these challenges and chances; they go far beyond 'professional paid work' and present their creative and often very unusual ways of strengthening European values in the context of democracy.

NGO YOUNG LIVES FOUNDATION FROM TÜRKİYE – IN A NUTSHELL

Genç Hayat Foundation, concerned about the rights and conditions of the children laboring on the hazelnut fields in Turkey, has designed the project “In a Nutshell” as a sustainable model to keep child workers away from hazelnut harvests in Turkey, to raise awareness on child labor at the local and national scale and supporting seasonal agricultural workers to be employed in permanent jobs in their own hometowns. Genç Hayat plans to implement an inclusive program in order to break down the prejudices, to maintain the social inclusion and to strengthen the culture of coexistence among the communities.

In a Nutshell project mainly put children in the center and established summer schools for both the children of seasonal agricultural workers and local children to keep them away from hazelnut harvest and to provide formal and non-formal education to keep up with their regular education. Genç Hayat Foundation aims not only to keep the children of Syrian, local and southeastern families away from working in the harvest with their parents, but also provides an alternative which supports their academic development and strengthens the social inclusion between them by implementing the education programs. In this context, since 2014, the foundation organized summer schools for the seasonal workers children and also for local families children in the coastal region of Akcakoca district of Düzce province. Besides, meetings with the labor contractors, focus group meetings with the parents, contact meetings with the local authorities have been held. In the last two years, in-depth education programs have been organized for 609 children in total. In addition to the summer schools which are being implemented with the participation of 109 volunteer students from different universities and with 12 teachers from Ministry of National Education.

Genç Hayat Foundation also organized trainings to 585 garden owners who work directly with Balsu, one of the biggest exporting company. Besides, focus group meetings with 1097 families and contact meeting have been held in collaboration with Akcakoca district governor and 18 village headmen. Additionally, families and children have benefited from medical screening. Food, clothing and Stationery support package have been distributed to the children and to the families in order to improve their well being.

By this project, Genç Hayat Foundation plans to implement an inclusive program in order to break the prejudices, to prevent the social exclusion and to strengthen the culture of coexistence among the communities. Furthermore, this project serves for informing NGOs, local authorities, academicians about seasonal agricultural labor and child labor and increasing their capacity.

Children are working 12-15 hours a day while deprived of basic needs and can't continue their education 1/3 of the school year, almost half of them leave school completely. The risk of these children separating from education has increased considerably. Dicle is just one of the children in the seasonal agricultural labor cycle, whom we met in Sakarya, one of the harvesting regions, as part of the Young Life Foundation's efforts to prevent seasonal agricultural work.

Watch the moving video of Dicle: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yd-kN_jH89U

NGO YOUNG LIVES FOUNDATION FROM TÜRKİYE – MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

When everything collapses, the most precious thing that remains is the will to rebuild together. In Hatay, a young person said, “I was born in this city, I grew up here, but it wasn’t just debris we pulled from the rubble—dreams came out, too.” That sentence felt like the essence of everything that was left behind. Could the dreams that emerged from beneath the ruins be the strongest foundation for a life rebuilt? That’s the question we started chasing. Because to start again with young people is not just to implement a support program – it’s to nurture democracy where it is most fragile.

The earthquake of February 2023 shattered not only buildings but also social bonds. Families were broken apart, schools were scattered, friendships left unfinished. One young person said he spent the night before the earthquake with his friends, and by morning, none of them were alive. He no longer wanted to go to school, because now school was not just a building – it was a corridor to grief. But weeks later, that same young person joined a group organizing play activities for children in his neighborhood. In times like these, young people do not only wait to be supported; they become the force that helps others heal.

Today, we know that what we used to call “youth engagement” stands in a very different place. It’s no longer enough to listen to young people, to assign them symbolic roles, or include them in pre-planned activities. We’ve seen the limits of token involvement. Genç Hayat Foundation’s (Young Lives Foundation) approach builds on this awareness. It’s no longer about merely “including” young people in processes – It’s about creating spaces where they are owners, drivers, and changemakers. That’s why “youth engagement” has evolved into something deeper, more equitable, and more genuine: *meaningful youth engagement*.

The clearest expression of this in the field is the *Youth Advisory Board (GDK)*. GDKs provide a space where young people don’t just express ideas – they implement them. They define problems, design solutions, and share their work with their communities. In doing so, they feel their voices carry weight. Engagement becomes not an invitation but a right and a responsibility.

In Adıyaman, a 16-year-old said, “I want to drop out of school and become a crane operator.” This wasn’t just about choosing a profession – it was a survival instinct, a rush to stand back up, to earn money. We didn’t respond right away – because we could hear all the unspoken pain behind the sentence. But later, this same young person started taking photos at GDK activities and helped organize a small neighborhood exhibition. One step added to another.

In Hatay, another youth said, “This is the first time everyone went quiet and waited just for me to speak.” That silence stayed with all of us. It wasn’t just about being given the floor – it was about being seen with dignity. Democracy is not only about voting; it is about being heard, being acknowledged, and being valued. That’s why Genç Hayat Foundation also developed the *Civic Involvement Project (CIP)* – a model that enables young people to become active citizens who observe community issues and design their own solutions. Through CIP, engagement becomes a habit of responsibility, not a one-time opportunity.

These young people – many from invisible lives – are now voices in public conversations, proposing solutions to problems they once endured silently. Engagement becomes not something “offered” to them, but something they naturally claim. This transformation injects hope into the social fabric. It becomes visible in restarted classes, rekindled friendships, and children who speak again after long silences.

Sometimes these spaces take the form of a play workshop, a community exhibition, or a meeting with local decision-makers. But always, young people are not just participants – they are leaders, designers, and sources of courage for others. Youth, when made passive, becomes isolated. But when empowered as subjects, it becomes transformative.

And perhaps the most important truth is this: youth engagement is not only about empowering young people – it’s also about helping society look in the mirror. When a child asks, “If I can’t play, am I still a child?”, it’s more than a pedagogical question. It’s a moral one. We can’t heal a society just by building classrooms without building playgrounds. We can’t empower youth by helping them without giving them a voice. We can’t build unity without speaking, deciding, and acting together.

Weaving engagement alongside young people who grow up in the most remote, often invisible corners of society is not just youth work – it’s redefining democracy itself. And that definition is not written in lofty declarations, but in small, real, lived moments. Because democracy is not a system where only the powerful decide – it’s one where everyone can speak, and everyone can contribute.

And we can build that together. With the child who works in the fields, the young person learning in a container classroom, the refugee dreaming in a different language, the teenager who lost a sibling but refuses to be silent... all of us, together. Because this isn’t just their story – it’s all of ours. And when this story is written with real equality, hope becomes endless.

Further information Genç Hayat / Young Lives Foundation: <https://www.genchayat.org/en/>

UNIVERSITY OF THESSALY, GREECE –

TEACHING AND LEARNING DEMOCRACY...ON FOOT

In recent years, a large number of seminars, workshops, lectures, conferences and other actions on the subject of democracy and democratic values have been held internationally. A significant number of European Union programs, such as Erasmus programs and others, deal with the issue of teaching and learning democracy. This fact highlights that most European countries, and not only them, include teaching and learning of democratic values as a dominant educational goal. The same is supported by international organizations dealing with social and educational issues, such as the Council of Europe (2023) and UNESCO (2016). Also, education in democratic values is a basic prerequisite for fulfilling the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as it is described by the United Nations (2015).

But how democracy and democratic values could be taught? There are certainly many different teaching approaches. Some are more theoretical, while others mainly use experiential actions in order for participants to understand the concept of democracy in practice. We utilized such an experiential approach to teaching democratic values in the context of a corresponding course at the Department of Early Childhood Education of the University of Thessaly in Greece. This specific approach used peripatetic learning as an educational framework, that is, a teaching and learning process that evolves while walking. This approach is not new. In ancient Greece it was mainly known from Aristotle's Peripatetic School, while in the following centuries various philosophical and religious schools and traditions used walking as an effective teaching and learning framework.

The ability of walking to create a pleasant climate that has a positive effect on the mental state of the participants, combined with the provision and processing of various cognitive and social stimuli that can be offered during its duration, make it an effective environment for the development of the learning process and especially its non-formal and informal forms. The open spaces in which peripatetic learning is developed, in contrast to traditional educational spaces, reduce the stress of the learners, while physical movement also acts as a catalyst in improving the mental state. According to Phillips (2018), walking cultivates our awareness and interaction with the people and things around us, while as Legat (2008) underlines, through walking, and especially its collective form, one can not only get to know a place, but also gain experiences through which they will develop cognitively and socially. These experiences include the development of a series of social skills such as those related to environmental awareness, collaborative skills, democratic values, intercultural communication, empathy, active citizenship and others.

In the educational approach mentioned above in the context of the academic course on teaching democracy at the Department of Early Childhood Education of the University of Thessaly in Greece, ten student teachers and ten asylum seekers in the students' age, from different countries, undertook eight walking tours discussing a series of topics related to democratic values and the democratic system. The topics concerned social inequalities and social justice, discrimination and racism, democratic and dictatorial regimes, and the refugee and migration experience. Accordingly, the routes were selected in a way that included walking stops at points that provided stimuli for the participants to discuss the above topics. The above action was carried out in collaboration with the city's Second Chance School, where refugee and immigrant students attend, as well as with the NGO Arsis, which hosts young asylum seekers in the same city (Vigklas, Magos, Alexopoulos, 2019).

Thus, the route, which has as a walking stop the visit to a school, was an occasion to discuss the right to education, a right that was not at all self-evident for participants originating from countries with dictatorial regimes, such as the young asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria. Similarly, the route through an area where there is a Roma camp, in conditions of great poverty, gave rise to a discussion of whether democracy is directly linked to social sensitivity and social welfare. In the same context, a walking stop at an old Orthodox Christian church stimulated discussion on the relationship between democracy and religious freedom.

Discussions about democratic values, democracy in practice and the obstacles to its implementation, the limits of democracy, but also the characteristics of a democratic citizen took place on all walking routes. The combination of the stimuli provided by the above-planned routes, the pleasant and relaxed atmosphere created during the walk, as well as the appropriately selected and pre-planned activities during the routes, fueled the development of particularly important discussions and reflections by all participants on the issues of democracy and democratic values.

UNIVERSITY OF THESSALY, GREECE –

AM I A DEMOCRATIC EDUCATOR?

The teaching and learning of democratic values requires educators who not only know what democratic values are, but also can apply them in the context of the educational process. In other words, they should meet the profile of a democratic educator.

But what are the main characteristics of a democratic educator?

According to Villegas & Lucas (2002), democratic educators have social and cultural awareness, have the deep desire and skills to function as agents of general social change. They also want to know the history of their students and communities and utilize culturally appropriate teaching practices so that all students, regardless of their cultural identity, can be included in the educational process. The democratic educator needs to support students who do not belong to the dominant ethnocultural group to have a successful educational path, without being assimilated.

Given that the dominant ethnic and cultural identity is imposed daily in school, democratic educators help students belonging to ethnic and cultural minorities to learn to function in parallel in two cultural and linguistic frames of reference, without losing their linguistic and cultural identity and the ties they have with their community (Ogbu, 1995).

Gorski (2012) makes a list of ten points that can accurately describe the role of democratic educators.

According to this list, democratic educators need to:

- Work at ideological intersections: not to focus only on the defense of one identity, for example the ethnocultural one, and ignore the defense of other identities, which are associated with it, such as gender identity, social class identity and others.
- Understand the social and cultural contexts of education: see how these contexts are influenced by broader ideologies that are linked to the dominant ideology.
- Reject the ideology of the dominant: do not support educational inequalities by using evaluation criteria common to all children, but take into account the cultural and social background of each child.
- Work to reduce prejudices and stereotypes and do not adopt superficial teaching practices that may reproduce stereotypes.
- Do not confuse democracy with values of global legitimacy. Global legitimacy is a hegemonic process of imposing values and as such has no place within the framework of a democratic institution.
- Do not give in to the temptation of easy or simplistic solutions and approaches to multidimensional and complex issues, even if the proposed solutions are popular.
- Be sufficiently informed: adequately document the opinions and proposals they make. Documentation cannot be limited to quantitative studies and numbers, but should seek and highlight the authentic voices and narratives of the subjects, which cannot be heard through a quantitative research.
- Work together with members of “alienated” communities: put into practice the ethical attitude of “working with the other and not for the other or on behalf of the other”, especially if they belong to privileged groups compared to the groups of others. To work for the cause of equality and social justice not only in words but also in deeds.

- To refuse to attribute the causes of social problems to those in the lower socioeconomic strata, but to those in the higher ones. To deny that “alienated” communities are responsible for their situation because of their own deficits. To reject the view that the way to correct a social inequality is to “fix” the people who suffer it, rather than the conditions that create it.
- To prioritize justice above superficial conflict resolution processes that do not take into account issues of privilege and power of privileged social groups.

Concluding the description of the above points, Gorski (2012) underlines that ultimately behind all the characteristics of the democratic teacher lies the commitment to reflection, that is, the commitment to: “asking myself - never stopping asking myself - how my work makes the school, the community, and society more just”.

One of the most important dimensions of education in democracy and correspondingly one of the basic characteristics of the democratic educator is the organization and participation in solidarity and activist actions, actions that condemn discrimination and racism and support equality and social justice. The participation of educators themselves in such actions is at the same time an example for learners in order to understand the need, on the one hand, to react against policies of discrimination and exclusion and, on the other hand, to defend the “voice” of vulnerable individuals and groups. Through their example, the educators-activists promote to their students the image of the active, democratic and socially sensitive citizen. As Kincheloe & Steinberg (1997) underline, democratic educators cannot remain politically neutral. They need to take a stand, express their opinions and, working in solidarity with underprivileged groups, highlighting the discrimination that exists both in education and in society.

NGO ARCA DI NOÉ FROM ITALY –

THE VOICE OF PARTICIPATION

The word democracy is layered with several meanings, each influenced by the country, the characteristics of the person discussing it, their social status, occupation, education, background and more. We could extend this list considerably. But does democracy have a unique and universal definition, agreed by everyone? If not, how can we find common ground on a word that holds different meaning (or meanings) for each individual? Are there values, principles or essential elements that can help people come to a shared understanding of democracy? For sure, one concept closely tied to democracy is participation. Most people would likely agree that true, meaningful participation leads to democratic spaces. Such spaces must be free, safe and accessible – ideally and materially. This article provides an insight of a project carried on by Arca di Noè aimed at providing free and safe spaces where people with disabilities could express their ideas, points of views and experiences. Spaces of inclusion and democracy.

In a democratic setting, people's ideas, experiences and perspectives should be listened to discussed and valued equally. Everyone's voice should be heard. And what if the voice we hear is "different"? Are democratic societies really committed to making spaces accessible to everyone including people with physical and/or mental disabilities? The right to access democratic spaces should go beyond papers and written words. It should be real and tangible, especially in places people interact daily, like workplaces and classrooms. Democracy also means being opened to shifting perspectives, and educational institutions play a key role in this process, encouraging students and young people to engage with differences while discovering commonalities. Focusing on disability, a U-Report survey by UNICEF (see <https://www.voicesofyouth.org/>) asked, "in your opinion, how could we improve the way we talk about disability?" sixteen percent of respondents felt that "contents about disability should be included in the educational-training programs". Arca di Noé strongly believes change begins in the immediate environment, through community engagement, concrete actions and by fostering debates using languages accessible to different groups. With the project *Bring the Change*, Arca di Noé adopted film as a medium to stimulate dialogue on topics that differ each year. The core of this project lies in bringing people together, promoting spaces where reality can be interpreted free of prejudice.

Following a period characterised by little access to educational experiences, in 2022 *Bring the Change* aimed to develop critical thinking in young people and broaden their view of the contemporary world through the language of documentary filmmaking. Cinema became a tool for understanding reality without stereotypes, planting a small seed for a society that values everyone's participation and voice. Participants in this project included high school students and individuals with disabilities working at B-Lab, the laboratory by Arca di Noè where productive activity becomes a learning experience aimed at employment inclusion, autonomy and participation in social life, both within and outside the workplace.

Using participatory video methodology, the group reflected on the value of differences in their daily lives, experimenting with audiovisual storytelling and diverse narrative techniques. The result was a short film, "Questa è la mia voce" ("This is My Voice"). This is my voice; can you hear it? To give everyone's voice a space to be heard is an essential part of democracy.

Article (IT): <https://www.arcacoop.com/questa-e-la-mia-voce/>

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Myu8KQmdZQg&t=6s>

NGO ARCA DI NOÉ FROM ITALY –

A NEW NARRATIVE THROUGH PARTICIPATORY VIDEO

This article explores a methodology adopted by Arca di Noè to propose a different and alternative narrative on migration: participatory video. In recent years, pace of communication has become increasingly rapid. While access to information on countless topics has grown and become easier than ever, the time people dedicate to reading an article has often significantly decreased. To attract reader's attention, news is often delivered through impactful headlines with content increasingly condensed and fast-paced. At the same time, a countercurrent movement has emerged: slow journalism. This approach values depth, accuracy, and context, allowing professionals to thoroughly investigate topics, cross-check sources, interview people and include diverse perspectives.

However, communication is not just a matter of speed or depth, long or short; perspective plays an equally key role, especially when addressing complex and sensitive topics like migration. Too often stories are told by "others", by those who observe and interpret events without directly experiencing them.

This brings us to an important question: shouldn't democracy ensure not only the right to free expression but also the opportunity for individuals to narrate their own stories, ideas, and experiences? To ensure their voices are heard and their perspectives visible?

Participatory video arises as a response to these questions, looking for new narratives beyond clichés and stereotypes, offering a more authentic, realistic narrative. More than just a storytelling tool, participatory video methodology empowers marginalized voices, providing individuals with means to tell their stories directly and to express themselves through filming.

Arca di Noè has embraced this methodology and, in close collaboration with Zalab Film and other associations, organised participatory video workshops aimed at fostering the active participation of young migrants in civil society.

These workshops are built around collaboration: participants choose the topics they wish to talk about and explore, craft the screenplay, and handle the filming process. Importance is given to sharing experiences, developing skills, and building connections: to the process rather than the product; by doing so the videos produced offer a unique and authentic perspective: that of the participant's themselves.

The workshops are free and open to everyone, designed to create an inclusive forum where people are not only actors in the film, but videos become a means of expression and self-narration.

One of the results of the workshops has also become a movie named *Un Giorno La Notte* (One day the night).

"Participatory video is a tool to interpret reality. It fosters community involvement and reshapes how the community perceives itself. This methodology is rooted in group creation, the absence of a leader, and the development of individual talents, as all great educational projects should be"

(Angelo Loy – filmmaker).

All videos and project descriptions are available on our website:

<https://www.arcacoop.com/cosa-facciamo/cultura-innovazione/video-partecipativo/>

NGO VIA BAYERN FROM GERMANY – THE CULTURATORIUM

The Culturatorium Approach: improvisation theatre combined with intercultural learning

Intercultural learning is essential – and can be exhausting. Our goal in intercultural trainings is to move from simplified generalizations, stereotypes and populist statements to differentiation, reflection and irritation of previous mental patterns. Within the framework of intercultural learning we look at power structures and analyse discrimination structures. We want to encourage participants to take responsibility for their actions and for our social cohesion. Best case, the added value of intercultural learning and thinking becomes tangible to our participants. Despite this positive motivation, a certain paralysis can exist and spread. Often, there is a lack of lightness that would encourage participants to be creative and innovative in shaping co-existence in diversity, and instead, the heaviness of the issues creates a feeling of helplessness and kills energy needed to transform our interactions. This is exactly where Culturatorium kicks in: In an interdisciplinary combination of unusual kind, it brings together supposedly contradictory concepts such as art and learning, wit and depth, lightness and seriousness, body and mind.

Our approach "Culturatorium: Improvisation Theatre for Intercultural Education" combines innovative methods of theatre pedagogy with intercultural education. The methods of theatre pedagogy, especially improvisation theatre, enable a playful, humorous learning effect. With this approach, learning is fun and opens up "head, heart and hand", as Pestalozzi recommended.

The goals of Culturatorium workshops

- Give the participants a care-free time in which they can experience themselves as competent, happy people.
- Show the participants alternatives for thinking, feeling and acting, which are relevant to their everyday life.
- Offer minorities a stage on which they can show the audience (which often consists of the majority society) what is important to them.
- Make participants aware of their own competences and expanding them.
- Sensitise participants to mechanisms of exclusion and their impact

The setup

We use approaches of intercultural education, as well as approaches of anti-racism and anti-discrimination and civic education. We also integrate resources and competence-oriented approaches and empowerment concepts. The pedagogical stance is based on the principles of improvisation theatre. We see theatre work as an approach that can change social structures, similar to the mindset of the Theatre of the Oppressed. From improv theatre we adopt the attitude that the participants' impulses arising in the moment shall determine our work focus. We have a shared understanding about what we want to convey, but how this happens is determined by the participants and not by us, the trainers. Our work is participative and process-oriented as well as resource- and relationship-oriented. In this way we achieve a high level of motivation as well as the chance to transfer the learnings to the participants' everyday life.

Principles of improvisation theater

Here's a metaphor: if improvisation theatre was a pizza, what would be the most important ingredients? The dough in improv theatre is the joy and fun of playing, spiced with a lot of humour – and self-mockery. But in order for this dough to rise really well, other ingredients are important. These are: Curiosity (about what will happen) and openness (about what is happening). Why? Because everything is possible. It's all about allowing, not blocking offers. It's about accepting them. Improvisation theatre also leads to irritations and misunderstandings. That's part of it. It needs to be dealt with and constitutes another ingredient: Indulgence. Nothing is right, nothing wrong; endure misunderstandings and use them productively, let irritations happen. If performance situations do not work out, it reinforces and shapes this attitude as well as this ingredient: Joy of failure. And in order for the play to continue, not only after failure, another ingredient is needed: Willingness to change, joyfully initiating a change of perspective. Finally, the tomato sauce that is spread over the entire pizza base is patience.

Implementation of the principles

The pizza topping informs us about this: The first is to build trust. We make this possible by creating a relaxed atmosphere, choosing pleasing locations and taking care of physical well-being. Trust is also created by revealing something about yourself as a trainer. That can be, for example, information about your private life or about your own failures. A further important element is the focus on similarities. When working with a group, we only do what everybody understands. Topics that require insider knowledge are neither compatible nor funny – or only to a few, while the others feel excluded. Therefore, mechanisms of exclusion must be handled sensitively.

Sometimes participants in stage performances behave either in a highly intellectual way, or in a dominantly emotional way, or they just start acting without direction or ideas. In intercultural communication it is important to know at which of these levels communication takes place. For this we use the principle "head – heart – hand" developed by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. It distinguishes between the cognitive (head), the emotional (heart) and the action level (hand). Often it is helpful to be able to consciously switch between the different levels. Not all people are able to communicate at all levels simultaneously. People from relationship-oriented, collectivistic cultures communicate more on the emotional level than people from fact-oriented, individualistic cultures. Following the performances, the participants reflect with each other: On what level did we communicate? How can you tell? Who changed levels – when and why? What does that mean? It is helpful to draw a head, a heart and a hand on a flipchart and then, while reflecting on the situation, to indicate on which level action was taken.

The aim of our work is to sensitize people to the effects of cultural determinations in their daily actions and to point out alternatives; these effects can appear on an individual level like in thoughts, feelings and actions of people, as well as in the structure of institutions, in the organization of work processes, time structures, etc.

Dealing with discriminatory and racist situations

We assume that almost all people, including ourselves, have racist and discriminatory attitudes (learned, adopted, acquired). One way for dealing with this is to reveal the attitudes and then to overcome them. Our approach offers different methods. First of all, the humor and lightness of the workshops create a relaxed atmosphere in which discriminatory attitudes are expressed. That's something we don't try to avoid. Only when these attitudes are expressed we can work with them. And the injury by derogatory utterances is an experience in everyday life, which we do not ignore, but actively confront. Statements and role expectations with racist and discriminatory backgrounds are broken with the help of improvisation theatre – by radical changes of context, by role changes or by conscious reversal of status relations. Through specific exercises we show the participants a possibility to deal with remarks and attitudes – in the sense of empowerment.

Prejudice: We understand this to mean assumptions about other people. We form them constantly – mostly in order to give ourselves orientation (e.g. is my counterpart friendly or should I be careful?). Negative prejudices often serve to devalue others. We believe that we already know the person (or group) in front of us. Prejudices thus become judgments and create distance. Prejudice awareness means to be vigilant about our prejudices and to question them again and again. At its core, this means entering into relationship with our counterpart. Since the improv theatre audience is invited to make spontaneous suggestions, we might also get to hear racist or discriminatory remarks at this point. As members of the Culturatorium, we accept these suggestions as it allows us to then work with them. We meet these statements with improv theatre methods: improv theatre works with clichés because they are known to the majority and it is interesting to counter them. If, for example, a black male teenager holding something in his hand is asked about the object and a person from the audience associates: "a knife", this is a racist cliché. We counter it by continuing the story with: "Ah, you are our new baker apprentice! It's great that you brought your own knife with you! Let's try it out together." Such an approach not only leads us out of the expected role, giving the audience a new perspective, creating new reference systems in our minds. It also offers young people who experience discrimination an alternative opportunity to respond to such allegations in future.

"Rewind" is as a method for dealing with errors or problematic statements: if participants say or do something problematic or "wrong" (hurtful, politically incorrect statements, power expressions, strong blocking or other ways of sabotaging), the "rewind" method is suitable in order to elegantly correct a situation without having to expose or even dispraise. Like rewinding a videotape, the players move – accompanied by a corresponding "winding noise" – back to the point from which they can restart the scene. Thereby, the correction becomes a playful element. Another method is the role switch. If it becomes clear that one person treats the other in a discriminatory manner during a scene, the "role switch" format helps the change perspective. Let's think for example of a schoolyard scene where one person is bossed around by the other. At the call "switch roles!" the two players swap the place and the role. Now, both performers adopt the other's role and can react to and change the situation. This is really exciting, especially when the two players have a very different socio-economic status (as in the case of the boss-secretary, the clerk of the asylum seeker, the teacher-student or the restaurant owner and cleaning staff). Both players and spectators are stimulated to an empathic change of perspective.

We are aware that dealing openly with discrimination is a balancing act – between awareness and reproduction. And we decide to accept this challenge (for all).

Further information (D) at: <https://via-bayern.de/project/buehne-frei/>

NGO INTERPUNKTIONEN FROM GERMANY –

THE VILLAGE TALK

The 'Dorfgespräch' (Village Talk) was started as a rural integration approach in the wake of many refugees entering Germany in 2015 and the subsequent discussions around the 'division of society' (which were on the one hand termed 'naive leftist good fellows' vs. 'right-wing outraged citizens'). It was set up as a publicly funded project of civic education in an area of South Bavaria, and spread from there to other regions of Germany. Up to now around 60 'Village Talk' processes have taken place. The concept was published in 2019/2022 as "Village Talk. A contribution to developing democracy in rural areas". It was also multiplied by providing workshops in regional and German-wide programs on developing rural areas.

In one sentence it can be understood as a 'village renewal in our heads'. Its motto is: "We are the ones that have been missing". Instead of renewing rural architecture or focusing on classical 'topics' (traffic, seniors, environment...), its core is made of encounters between human beings as such and their sense-giving values in life. The starting point for the concept are therefore personal encounters as the basis for a dialogue that is not only rational, but above all emotional and value-oriented. Beyond a thematic focus, value-based questions were asked first: How do we as a village community deal with those who do not fit into our patterns of thinking and behavior? What values underlie what we support or reject? Who are "we" anyway? Do we define ourselves in opposition to others, or is "we" an inclusive term that also encompasses diversities and tensions? How do we ultimately want to live together in close proximity in a rural social space? With these questions, the 'Village talks' are not only a format for participation, but above all pursue a political and democratic goal: the preservation of an open society that knows how to deal actively and productively with diversities.

What makes the project special

Against this backdrop, what is special about these village encounters? The approach contributes to democracy, but it is not a linear contribution to solving the "problem of populism." Rather, it is based on a playful attitude and, in a sense, similar to artistic creation: it attempts to motivate people to unleash their creative potential to shape their relationships and concerns together and thus discover what is possible. This attitude is particularly important in conflictual debates about different values for shaping the future. Beyond the methodological details, this is summarized in five points below.

1. Focus on values, relationships, and conflicts

Many municipal citizen participation projects focus on specific challenges or deficits. The goal of such projects is results-oriented, joint action to initiate visible change on the ground. The focus is thus on rational action and "reasonable" solutions.

In contrast, the 'Village Talks' focus on the personal relationships and emotions of local residents. Through a comprehensive stakeholder dialogue process in advance and resource-oriented networking, personal trust beyond existing institutions is promoted. Actively engaging with one's own and others' values allows for reflection on what is common and what is different. Dissent and conflict are addressed as essential components of democratic coexistence in order to understand difference as productive. So initially, it is not about anything concrete, but rather about one's own self-image and attitude toward coexistence and about tolerating and acknowledging diversities. This is particularly important in rural areas, where very different people often live very close together and depend on each other in their everyday lives.

2. Productive disruption of existing power structures

In local government and politics, existing power structures and decision-making processes are often clung to because they are familiar and provide orientation. In contrast, the 'Village Talks' bring together very different people from a village in one room who often do not actively encounter each other in everyday life and who often operate in separate worlds. This reveals unexpected resources and a willingness to actively participate among those who are not considered to be among the active members of the "village center" or the "doers" – who may be more on the margins, have recently moved to the village, or have little interest in traditional village life. The encounters challenge and question existing structures in politics, administration, institutions, and associations in a constructive way. They allow a new perspective on the potential of the village and enable innovative ideas to be initiated on an equal eye level.

3. Shaping a new "we"

The traditional "we" and the identity of a group are defined by belonging and differentiation from "others." In villages, this sense of belonging is defined, for example, by clubs, customs, or dialect. In times of crisis, this way of thinking can quickly give rise to powerful populist and exclusionary movements. 'Village Talks' open up the opportunity to reflect on the existing "we" of a village and to learn and explore what a new "we in diversity" could look like – a "we" that enables everyone to be on an equal footing and sees itself as inclusive. They open up new types of interaction between the majority and minority in the close-knit social environment of the village, thereby strengthening the relevance of minority perspectives.

4. Strengthening political awareness and action at the local level

Some people experience politics as abstract and inaccessible. Populist statements about politics and politicians are socially acceptable among large sections of the population but not discussed. Political action as such does not always have a good reputation, even among people in villages. Accordingly, voluntary engagement, which is taken for granted, is often characterized as apolitical. 'Village Talks' raise awareness that voluntary engagement and taking responsibility for new ideas are the essence of political action. Against this backdrop, participating villagers are encouraged to see democracy as a way of life that strengthens their own scope for shaping everyday life in rural areas, following the question of democracy: "how do we want to live together?"

5. Involvement of everyone through a low-threshold format

The 'Village Talk' is designed as a low-threshold format with a touch of humor, in keeping with the project's motto, "We are the ones that have been missing". The focus of the 'Village Talks' is on a sense of "lightness", which is also reflected in the approach, the framework, the methods and materials used, as well as the visual design and moderation. Being able to question oneself and encounter others in a playful manner are good prerequisites for preventing populist and extremist hardening, according to the motto: We meet each other so directly that prejudices don't have a chance to take hold.

Conclusion

The project pursues a very open-ended approach that initiates new connections and creative action through direct encounters between people and respectful irritations. 'Village Talks' have a methodological framework, but they are not limited to the linear processing of specific topics or goals. This means that such a process must be allowed to fail – people can refuse to participate, positions of power can be too strong for human openness, and institutional tendencies toward persistence may block creative change. But it is precisely this uncertainty and risk that are signs of a vibrant democracy.

Visit www.dorfgespraech.net/impressionen for impressions and examples.

NGO KISTA FOLKHOGSKOLA FROM SWEDEN – STOCKHOLMSPALAVERN

Stockholmspalavern – a place where conversation comes alive – began in the winter of 2019 as a forum for open, curious, and exploratory conversations where anyone who wishes is welcome to participate.

At its heart is a collective inquiry — not a debate, not a lecture. Its guiding motto is:

“To listen is to suspend one’s doubts.”

Each conversation evening begins with a specially invited guest reflecting on the chosen theme under a personal subheading. This introduction lasts about 45 minutes, after which the evening flows seamlessly into an open conversation, where everyone present is invited to share thoughts, stories, and reflections. This is not a panel, nor a Q&A. It is a space where we try, together, to hold the complexity of our shared human condition — to listen, to think, to feel, and to speak with one another.

In a time when public discourse is often reduced to noise, positions, and performances, Stockholmspalavern insists on something quieter and more essential: the right to meaningful conversation. It is founded on the belief that human beings, regardless of status or background, need spaces where they can articulate what matters to them — not to persuade or defend, but to be heard, and to hear others in turn. This applies not only to those commonly described as “voiceless” in society — the marginalized, the overlooked — but also to those who appear firmly established: professionals, artists, academics, citizens with a platform. All of us, at some point, find ourselves in need of a space where we can speak without performance, where we are not reduced to roles or credentials, but met as fellow beings trying to make sense of our lives.

Equally central to the ethos of the Palaver is a deep conviction: that every person, regardless of age, rank, origin, education, or social standing, carries something of value that others can learn from.

Wisdom is not monopolized by the articulate or the powerful; insight can surface from any voice, often from where we least expect it. True conversation begins not in authority, but in humility — in the willingness to recognize that each human life is a bearer of perspective, and that the act of listening is, in itself, a way of learning. Conversation, in this spirit, is not a luxury. It is a form of care, and even a form of resistance — against the acceleration of thought, the commodification of speech, and the silencing effects of isolation. To listen, and to be listened to, is to affirm one’s existence within a shared world. And so, each gathering at the Palaver is a quiet act of trust: that when we speak openly, and listen deeply, something essential is restored — not only between us, but within us.

Topics for humans and citizens

The Stockholmspalavern program committee selects themes each season that speak to us as both human beings and members of society. Some past topics include:

- *What are we longing for, really?*
- *The Language of Art – The Voice of Democracy*
- *Community and Disagreement*
- *Sharing Stories*
- *Who can one be?*
- *Experiencing Art*
- *How do we live well?*

A Third Space

Stockholmspalavern draws inspiration from, among others, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of a "third space" – a site that cannot be claimed or dominated, but where open conversation can unfold.

In a time when dialogue is often shaped by polarization, simplification, and performance, Palavern strives to be something else. A space where we carry "the burden of our shared complexity" (Sloterdijk) and resist what Tranströmer called the "furious hunger for simplicity".

Collaboration with Sheekawadaag

Since 2023, Stockholmspalavern has been collaborating with Sheekawadaag – a Somali-language conversation forum located in one of Stockholm's suburbs, initiated by the organization *Folk till Folk*. It is founded on the same spirit of openness, participation, and curiosity. Two joint conversation evenings take place every semester.

Along the River

*Conversing with contemporaries I saw heard behind their faces
a flood running, pulling the willing and unwilling into itself.
The creature with cemented eyes
who wants to be hurled current-wise into the waterfall
throws himself forward, without a shiver,
in a furious hunger for simplicity.*

—Tomas Tranströmer, translated by Torgeir Fjeld

<https://stockholmspalavern.com/>

NGO KISTA FOLKHOGSKOLA FROM SWEDEN: A PLACE OF LEARNING IN JÄRVA

The Folk high school's Pedagogy and Role in Society – Past, Present, and Future

The Swedish folk high school is not merely an educational model. It is a movement for lifelong learning, a democratic project, and a social force – rooted in people's lives, dreams, and their right to grow. Since the 1860s, folk high schools have played a decisive role in including and integrating people into their communities. This applies not only to newly arrived migrants in today's Europe, but also to citizens with limited means of influencing their own life situations – individuals to whom the folk high school has offered a place for development, participation, and voice.

A History of Inclusion and Empowerment

When the folk high schools emerged in the late 19th century, they targeted young adults in rural areas – often farmers, laborers, and women – who had previously been excluded from higher education. Their aim was not merely the transfer of knowledge, but to nurture responsible, reflective, and participatory citizens. This was a form of learning that did not measure output, but growth.

During the 20th century, the folk high schools became central institutions in Sweden's social movements – including the labor movement, the temperance movement, and the free churches. The schools strengthened people's ability to understand their own lives, society, and how to engage in shaping it – especially for those otherwise left on the margins.

A Broader Understanding of Integration

Today, folk high schools play an important role in the integration of newcomers to Europe. But their mission extends further. They help to integrate people into their own societies – not as passive recipients of support, but as agents with voice and capacity. Young people without high school diplomas, the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, older adults seeking growth – all come together here in an environment of inclusive learning.

To integrate does not mean to conform to something predetermined, but to enter into community on one's own terms, as oneself. This is a deeper understanding of integration than what labor market policies or language tests alone can offer.

Non-Instrumental Learning – The Core of the Folk High School

In a societal climate increasingly shaped by utilitarianism, measurability, and return-on-investment logic, the folk high school offers something else: non-instrumental learning. This means viewing human beings not as means to other ends – as labor, consumers, or efficient individuals – but as ends in themselves.

This type of learning embraces existential questions, creative exploration, life interpretation, language, aesthetics, and critical thinking. It is not just about learning in order to work, but about understanding oneself, others, and one's place in the world.

The pedagogy of the folk high school is built on relationships, trust, dialogue, and shared reflection. It is a form of education that takes the whole person seriously – her history, roots, voice, and potential.

Folk High Schools in Marginalized Areas – A Living Presence

In so-called disadvantaged areas, the folk high school plays a particularly crucial role. Here it meets young adults who have often experienced educational failure, segregation, economic insecurity, and limited hope for the future. In this context, the folk high school offers something unique: a space where one is seen, heard, and affirmed.

For many, it becomes a second chance – or perhaps a first – to discover their voice, build confidence, and find direction in life. It also offers a quiet resistance to society's tendency to measure human worth in grades, statistics, or productivity.

Kista Folk High School – A Place of Learning in Järva

Kista Folk High School, located in the Järva area in northern Stockholm, is a vivid example of what a folk high school can mean when it is locally grounded and democratically engaged. Since its founding in 2007, the school has become an important meeting place for young adults seeking a new direction in life – and a place to belong. Järva is often described as a “socially vulnerable” area, marked by structural inequalities, segregation, and limited access to institutional power. In such a context, Kista Folk High School plays a unique and vital role – not only by offering education, but by actively creating a space of dignity, hope, and shared agency. Here, education is not something administered to people; it is something built with them.

The school offers general education courses, Swedish language and civic orientation for newcomers, vocational training, and creative programs. But its real strength lies in its thematic and values-based approach. Democracy, human rights, sustainability, and civic responsibility are not just course content – they are the very method. At Kista, democratic education is not about being informed *about* how democracy works – it is about becoming emotionally grounded *within* the values that make democracy possible. This means that every student is not just a recipient of knowledge, but a co-creator of meaning. Participation is not a technique – it is the starting point. The daily work of the school is anchored in the belief that every voice matters, and that collective learning begins with mutual recognition. This kind of learning cannot happen in a formalized, hierarchical setting. It requires an open space – one that no authority can dominate – where people can speak, listen, and be changed by one another. Kista Folk High School strives to protect and cultivate that space, every day.

The school has also been – and continues to be – actively involved in a wide range of democracy projects, in collaboration with civil society organizations in Sweden and across the EU, including through the Erasmus+ programme. Through these initiatives, the school has developed and shared participatory pedagogies tailored to youth who often find themselves on the margins of traditional education and civic life. It is both a local force and a contributor to the European conversation on how learning can support inclusion, resilience, and the right to imagine a future.

For many young people in Järva, Kista Folk High School is more than a school – it is a breathing space. A place where you are not defined by test scores or background, but by your capacity to grow, to speak, and to care. It is a place where being human is enough to be taken seriously – and where democracy is not just taught, but lived.

<https://kistafolkhogskola.se/>

C.

STARTING
THE
JOURNEY
AGAIN

Be part of it: a letter to European democracy

Almost at the end of this manifesto for strengthening diverse democracy in Europe we are coming back to the initial question: “How do we want to live together in Europe?”

We invite you as a reader to reflect on this question and write down your personal answer in form of a ‘letter to democracy’. You can use the inspiration from the twelve words and the artwork from above – of course there are many more words worth reflecting – here are some of them which might be an anchor to write down your personal reflection:

resource

property

love

religion

radical

language

uncertainty

nature

reciprocity

unfulfilment

disruption

appreciation

silence

unfulfilled

mutual

wayfarer

correspondence

unexpected

reflection

attunement

trauma

advocacy

dilemma

othering,

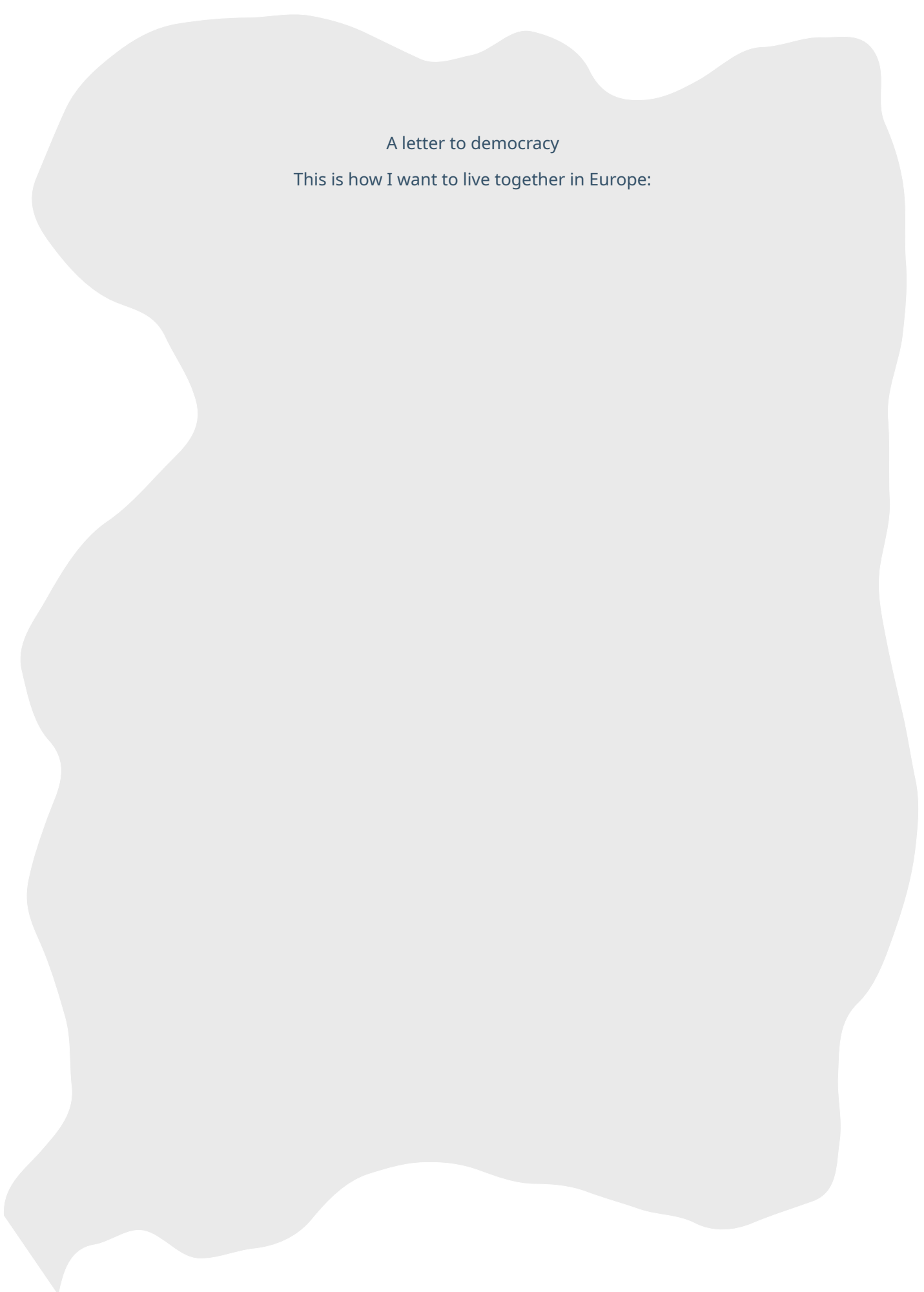
diversities

emotion

feeling

participation

value



A letter to democracy

This is how I want to live together in Europe:



If you want, you can share your letter and post it on your channels and in our blog – send it to a friend, a colleague or family to start a discussion about democracy in Europe!

A NEW BEGINNING: BEING IN THE WORLD

We often struggle to know what we want. But we usually have no problem knowing what we don't want. We know what we want to move away from, we see the problems clearly – but we don't know who we might become if we change our fundamental structures of thought and power. We don't know who we are supposed to be. We don't know where we are going.

So what might a different life look like? A life that doesn't just say "no" to the unsustainable, but clearly says "yes" to what gives life? We're good at identifying all the "noes," but we also need to discover new "yeses". This question lies at the heart of a growing interest in philosophy not merely as a theoretical discipline, but as an existential practice – a way of living, experimenting, and listening. In fact, the search for alternative ways of being is closely tied to the health of democracy itself, which depends on our collective ability to imagine and articulate shared futures – together.

Modern society is largely built on control, efficiency, and measurability. We're expected to understand, explain, and manage – even those things that perhaps cannot be measured. But this way of viewing the world – as something objective, fragmented, and subordinate – has come at a deep spiritual and ecological cost. What we need now is not just a different kind of knowledge, but a different way of being in the world.

If we are to find new "yeses," we will explore how to recover forgotten desires. We can examine how to create a different kind of knowing, one that goes beyond fixed categories. We will renew our relationship with reality and see anew what truly matters. We ask anew who we are, and what "whatnesses" (what something actually is) emerge in

the world around us. To do so, we will learn to think differently.

Philosophy, in this context, becomes a counter-movement – not as an academic system, but as a way of life, a practice. To philosophize in this sense is to pause, to listen to what cannot be captured in formulas or rules, and to practice living slowly, attentively, and openly. It is not just about thinking correctly, but about sensing, about recognizing the limits of understanding, and cultivating wonder. A kind of learned ignorance that is not a failure, but the beginning of wisdom. The idea that wisdom lies in what we cannot fully grasp is not new. In the Middle Ages, thinkers described human reason as both powerful and limited. They argued that when we relinquish the demand to fully understand, a deeper form of listening becomes possible. Mystics, philosophers, and theologians before modernity often spoke of the world as a living whole, where humans do not stand outside, but within – In relation. Women such as Magdalena of Mecklenburg, who lived on the margins of institutional power in her time, expressed and embodied a profound understanding of the bodily, emotional, and existential connection between the human and the living world. The 15th-century philosopher and theologian Nicolaus Cusanus described a thought structure in which nothing remains static; instead, each thing flows into another through a threefold movement: something is left behind, something is carried forward, something new emerges. This is a kind of knowing that is not built on distance and separation, but on presence, care, and silence.

In other parts of the world, such worldviews were never severed by modernity's sharp definitions and categorizations – definition being from the Latin *de-* (off) and *finire* (to separate or set boundaries). Among some Indigenous cultures, languages

continue to describe nature not as a collection of objects – “trees,” “animals,” “weather” – but as kin, endowed with subjectivity and agency. In some languages, there is no division between “nature” and “culture,” because such a split never occurred.

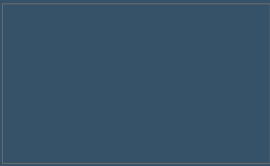
One does not say “I hear the bird singing,” but rather something akin to “birdsong happens through me.” This is a linguistic ecology that keeps the human within the world, not outside it. In such language – and the lifeways it reflects – resides a philosophy of life that we are now beginning to rediscover: not as nostalgic romanticism, but as a necessary corrective to a culture that has torn itself away from the earth. For a long time, we have operated under the assumption that the world consists of passive objects – that nature is a resource, a tool, an obstacle, or a raw material.

But science is now revealing something else: forests that communicate, fungi that make decisions and form networks across continents, animals that mourn, plan, and remember. In light of this, the boundary between nature and culture appears more as a cultural construction than a truth – one that is questionable. We are not separate from nature – we are nature. We breathe the same air as the trees, walk the same ground as the insects. We affect and are affected in every moment. And recognizing this interconnectedness is not only vital for our ecological survival – it is also essential for democratic life, which cannot thrive when we live in estrangement from the world and from each other.

This insight can take form as a lived reality in the various attempts to live differently. But these are not merely practical choices – they are philosophical ones. They are attempts to test what another life might be, to listen to the world rather than command it. And they are democratic in spirit -because they open space for dialogue, diversity of being, and shared responsibility. To think in this way also means recognizing what we do not understand. It means allowing the other to remain other – not to romanticize it, but to preserve its unicity. This applies not only to other people, but also to other life forms: trees, animals, fungi, wind. Here, recognition is not merely a way of knowing – It is a way of being with, of sharing presence, of refusing to annihilate through definition.

To be in the world is therefore not about grand revolutions. It is a slow movement: a shift in perspective, a receptive touch, a reexamined relationship. In this sense, philosophy becomes an ongoing practice – a vigilant way of living, in which we train ourselves to meet the world with humility, wonder, and responsibility. A way to once again become part of what we thought we stood outside of. And perhaps this is what democracy, in its deepest sense, calls for: not just rights and institutions, but ways of being that welcome difference, interdependence, and care. Perhaps it is there – In the practice, in the quiet attempts to live more attentively – that a different future begins to take shape. A future that is democratic in the sense of living together as humans, with animals, plants and the unknown future.

D. ANNEX



APPROACH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MANIFESTO

In love with democracy

Katrin Kuhla, Consortium Manager

What happens when two philosophers on democracy meet on CAN DO meetings? Right, they create the idea of a CAN DO DEMOCRACY project and the idea of a “Manifesto on Democracy”. This happened when Florian Wenzel and Åke Larsson, the authors of this manifesto, met in CAN DO meetings of the preceding CAN DO project. What happens if this idea is spread in the international CAN DO community? Together an application is written, re-written after a first rejection and voilà the first meetings are implemented and the manifesto is to be printed.

We are very happy that again CAN DO could serve as a breeding ground for the development and implementation of these very innovative and empowering methods. It was possible due to the dedication and perseverance of Florian and Åke, but also of all other people involved from all partner countries Sweden, Italy, Greece, Turkey and Germany. Çağdaş Özbakan, the coordinator of Genç Hayat provided us with a magical CAN DO meeting in Hatay/Turkey in which we could develop, test and integrate some of the ideas, approaches and methods of this manifesto. Sara Arlati, the coordinator of Arca di Noè, has put our common ideas in wonderful drawings.

The purpose of CAN DO is to empower educators in the social field on a professional and personal level. In our work democracy is inevitable, we all have to be lovers of democracy in order to do our work at CAN DO. I am grateful that we now this love of democracy was put into letters, into a manifesto. I hope that the manifesto will support us to understand the value of democracy, to reach for more democracy and to support those working on democracy.

For more information of the CAN DO approach, please visit the project website – there you will find more publications and films about CAN DO:

<http://www.candoempowerment.>

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Democracy is close to life – unforeseeable, on the move, seeking orientation in the unknown.

It shows itself in the diverse community of humans being committed to one another, exploring changing waters and winds, finding creative routes to the future.

In Europe, there are many attempts to stop this ship of democracy. Technocracy, capitalism & populism are some of the names trying to make the community of sailors either follow autocratic moves or be excluded from unfolding in liberty. Civil society and its creative, critical potential is increasingly prevented from being appreciated as vital for democracy. Crises and emergencies seem to call for urgent action beyond democracy – yet this is exactly the time when we need it.

This manifesto gives a fresh look on the possibilities and strengths of democracy, of its inherent values which are at the core of what it might mean to be European. In an international effort it presents creative symbols, words and inspiring practice on how to live a democratic life together in Europe. Small activities invite for experiencing the potential of radically connecting democracy to human life itself.



Participants who contributed to the manifesto - CAN DO meeting in Hatay / Türkiye, May 2025