



Democracy Workshop Forum

of the Austrian Parliament

Friday, 29 September 2023



5th Democracy Workshop Forum

The role of Parliament in promoting an understanding of democracy

What is the Democracy Workshop Forum?

The Democracy Workshop of the Austrian Parliament is a unique programme aiming to share knowledge and stimulate interest in politics and in democratic processes among young people. During the last 12 years, this programme has also become an important “export model”: in the national Parliaments of Montenegro and Kosovo, the Democracy Workshop project has already been running successfully for many years. In 2023, the offer of the Democracy Workshop programme also started in Albania. In three other Parliaments - in North Macedonia, Slovakia and Georgia - further related cooperation is being implemented.

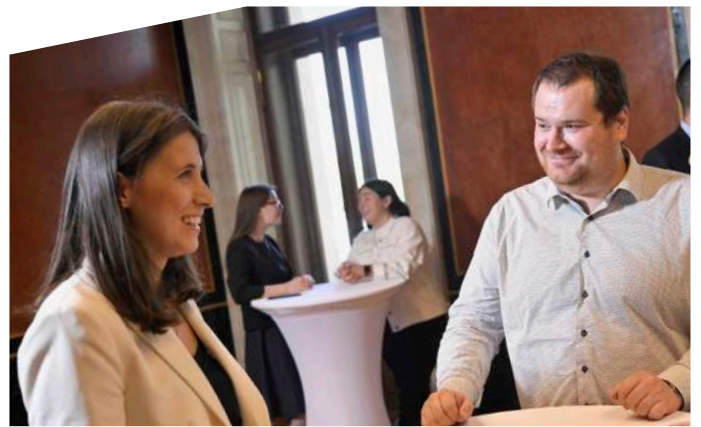
In this context, it seemed vital to connect the Democracy Workshop community and to build a network to exchange experiences and best practices on a regular basis. In 2021, the **Democracy Workshop Forum (DWF)** was initially organised jointly by the Austrian Parliament, IDM and the ERSTE Foundation. Since then, it has been held successfully four times online. This year, upon invitation of the Austrian Parliament, the DWF took place for the first time as an in-person event focused on connecting

the growing teams of the Democracy Workshop and strengthening institutional and personal contacts while discussing important topics of the Democracy Workshop programme.

Raising interest in political participation is the key to a vibrant parliamentary democracy and one of the core tasks of national parliaments. In this regard, the Austrian Parliament would like to thank all members of the Democracy Workshop community for their continued enthusiasm and dedication to this project.

The Forum gathers people with different backgrounds who share involvement in the Democracy Workshop programme, including trainers and colleagues working in the respective national parliaments. “Strengthening Democracy through Education” was the motto of the 5th Democracy Workshop Forum during which first-hand experience was gained of what it is like to be a workshop participant. As the media product is an essential element of the concept, the colleagues collected their ideas in this newspaper as part of this special Workshop edition.





Official report by the Parliamentary Correspondence:

Fifth Democracy Workshop Forum in Vienna

Parliamentary Administration held transnational network meeting for democracy education

Vienna (PK) - "Strengthening Democracy through Education" was the motto of the Fifth Democracy Workshop Forum which was held at the Austrian Parliament this week on September 28-29. The Parliamentary Administration joined participants from Albania, Georgia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Slovakia with their Austrian counterparts to exchange views on democracy education at this transnational network meeting.

Upon invitation of the Austrian Parliament, this year's Forum took place for the first time as a face-to-face event. The focus was on exchanging experiences and strengthening regional cooperation. Of particular interest was the Parliament's flagship Democracy Workshop programme, which has become a notable export model. The participants also engaged in a Workshop themselves.

The Democracy Workshop programme has achieved success in involving young people in democracy education since 2007. As a thriving institution of the Austrian Parliament, it has also been taken up in other countries to strengthen democracy education while serving to deepen further international cooperation with other parliaments.

In the national Parliaments of Montenegro and Kosovo, the Democracy Workshop project has already been running successfully for many years. In 2023, the offer of Democracy Workshops also started in Albania. In three other Parliaments - North Macedonia, Slovakia and Georgia - further related cooperation is being implemented.

National parliaments are crucial actors in providing education and raising awareness about democratic processes and in encouraging young people to participate actively. The fact that the Democracy Workshop Forum is being expanded to include an Eastern Partnership country for the first time, with the participation of Georgia, shows the growing reach of the programme. (end) red

What does it take for young participants to grow as a responsible, active citizen?

Participants from Austria, Georgia, Kosovo and North Macedonia

To teach responsibilities means starting at a young age. This means that in order to raise active citizens, you have to start educating kids on how important their role in society is.

Although at times we consider that certain concepts are difficult for kids, it is important to be at their level, and make them understand it from their own perspective.

Teaching kids to step up and speak up for themselves when they are in the second grade, means raising adults to feel included in the society to which they belong.

Therefore, it is never too early to understand that having a different opinion is not wrong. But it takes a safe space to express opinions that

are not the same as

those of the crowd. This space is built by active citizens who were once taught that their role in society matters and that they do make a difference.

This brings us to the conclusion that explaining democracy not only means explaining its concepts or risks.

Sometimes it means explaining its crucial role in our everyday lives and how difficult it would be to be part of a non-democratic system.

Bearing that in mind, we can highlight that it is so very important for the Parliament to have its citizens well-informed and well-educated on what a democratic world is, its difficulties, its risks and yet its advantages, through activities such as the Democracy Workshop programme. Getting to know closely what the work of an MP means and how the democracy inside Parliament works, is best described by MPs themselves. Therefore, it is important for them



to be engaged in raising the interest of youngsters to participate actively. Their work is specific and so is their political background. However, they are all brought together by the same interest, which is building a democratic state for everyone. That being said, it's not about the party they have joined, but the politics they choose to make democracy work.

It is important for youngsters to understand that you don't necessarily need to be part of a party to make a difference. Sometimes it takes your neighbourhood to start, and it does not have to end at Parliament. Actively engaging in society is not limited to Parliament; a lot more can often be done outside of it.



Engaging with young people

Sharing tips on how to make democracy cool!

The whole point of the Democracy Workshop programme is to challenge children to think more about democracy and how they are part of it. But what happens when some of them “democratically” express their desire not to participate?

It was a beautiful day. Children were working peacefully, until one of them decided to sit at my table, sharing a terrible joke. In that moment, I felt confused and for a second, I did not know what to do, as I had lost the attention of the group. Everyone started to laugh, as I was taking a deep breath and reorganised my thoughts. “You have a great impact on the group!” I said. “Now you can help as my assistant, to explain to others the role of media in a democracy!” I was kind of surprised to see how quickly his attitude changed, as he started to help me out. As an educator, you have to deal with difficult situations that can arise at any moment, and deal with the unexpected. The method I used here was Paradox Intervention, as one of the many methods we use to deal with situations during the workshops. In our work, it is very important to have a toolbox of methods to deal with all kinds of situations and to stay flexible all the time, but never to lose sight of our goal: Understanding together that we are all part of our democracies.

Edona's Story

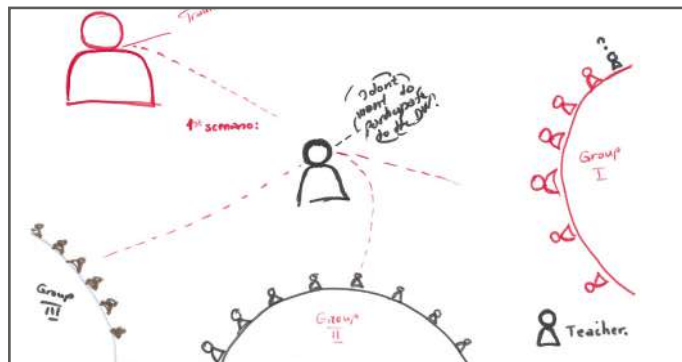


The children are more than willing and happy to work together as a group and develop their own media product. But it also happens from time to time that children do not “want” to participate in the Democracy Workshops at first. Depending on the context there might be different reasons for it: from trying to deliver a certain social image to not actually believing the deliverance of democracy in their country. Young people participating sometimes are unwilling at first to express their perspective and to contribute to the process in a constructive way. Colleagues from the different Democracy Workshops shared some important points on how to deal with these cases as well as some very interesting stories.

First of all: It's important to treat every person equally, because educators and the workshop participants communicate on an eye level from the beginning of the workshop. We all work together (as we should in a democracy). Sitting with the participants in a circle is one of the first steps to show them this. It is also very important for them to know that everyone has some responsibilities during the workshop, and if someone doesn't do their job, others will have a tough time, because they need to do more.



Young students participate in a democracy workshop



An example how to include everyone into the workshop.

Democracy Workshops give a chance to every participant to engage and express their opinion, what is very important for them, because often they don't have that possibility in their usual communities, at school or in the family. This is a non formal type of education, which gives opportunities to get young people to engage with democracy, how to contribute in their society, giving them different tasks. Educators sometimes must deal with disturbances from participants, but that is connected with the topic, so it is used like a contribution from them, and not be disciplined.

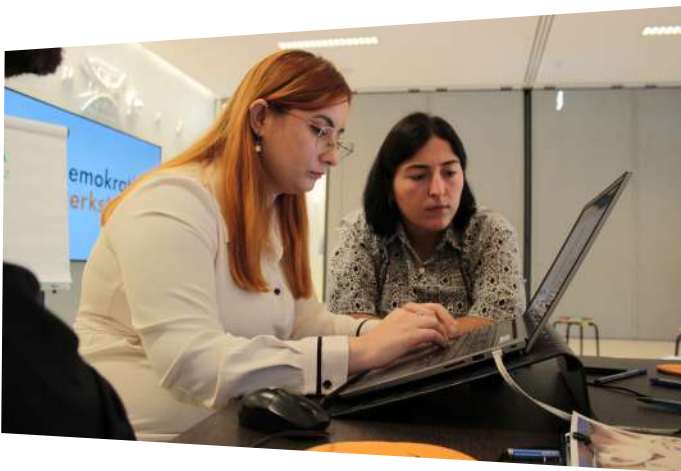
Participants of the Democracy Workshop programme make their own media products; as educators, we help them to develop those and their own thoughts about democracy. Working as an educator in Democracy Workshops with young citizens is a fruitful and positive experience, challenging and much more, but never a boring one-way street between trainers and participants.

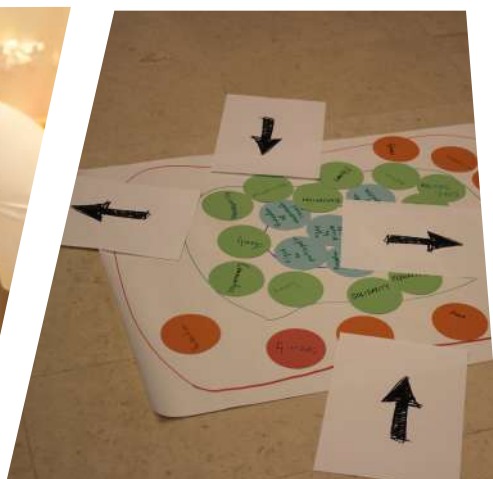
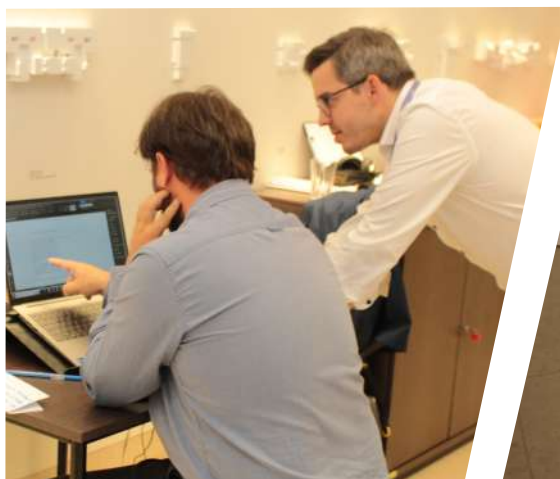
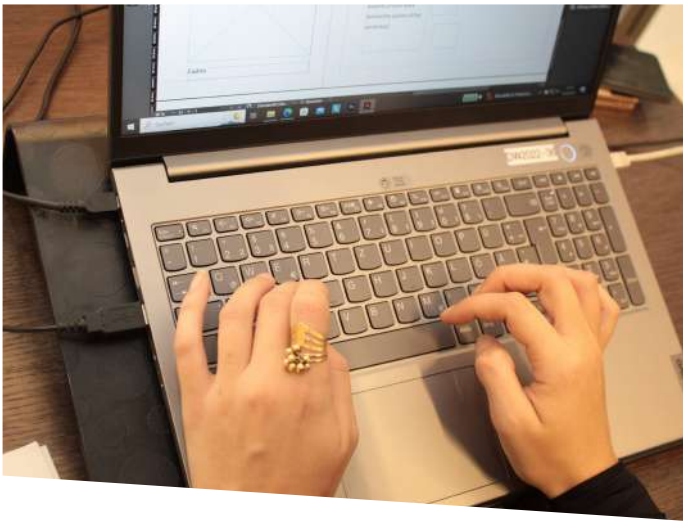
What does the programme mean to young participants, to us as educators and to Parliament? If one could sum it up, it's about showing democratic behaviour all through our interactions, expressing a democratic approach to learning and filling this "abstract" concept with life. This has a huge impact on living together in our society.



Participants from Albania, Austria, Kosovo, Montenegro

Impressions from the workshop:





Behind the scenes

Participants from Albania, Austria, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Slovakia



This group is made of professionals working in Parliament whose main task is to organise different educational activities (Democracy Workshops, guided tours, Youth Parliament, etc.).

The main questions we tried to answer during the group work were:

- Who can you reach with which medium?
- How can you generate outreach with your workshops?
- What are or could be important aspects of your work behind the scenes of the workshops?
- What has to be done before, during and after a workshop?

The most important part is to have good planning on how to reach your target groups (teachers, participants, MPs and general public) and to use the proper media, such as websites, e-mails, social media, to utilize the workshop products (newspaper), different networks and to have a clear structure, to manage different expectations successfully



and to communicate all the results to all stakeholders.

This way, it is possible to achieve the best outcome and reach more people beyond the workshop participants.

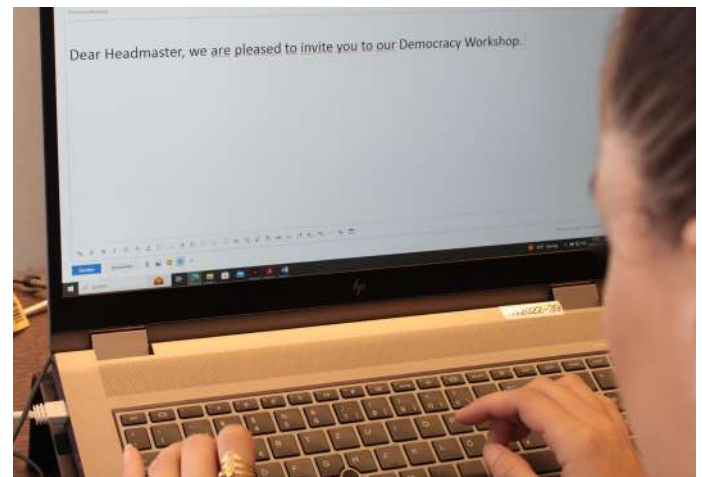
One of the crucial aspects of a successful workshop is communication within the team, as well as between the team and the people working behind the scenes. Being able to discuss expectations, goals and outcomes serves as the main driver for the teamwork.



The Democracy Workshop is a specific and multidisciplinary programme which requires the input and support of each department of the Parliament. This is in order to achieve the main purpose of the programme, which is to raise awareness about democracy and all of its aspects and the importance of youngsters in it. We have to be aware of many layers of this programme to make sure we maximise its potential.



Great breakthrough - visibility across the Democracy Workshops on all channels



Check out the media products of the Democracy Workshop online

Reach out to schools, start collaborations



Invite MPs and talk with them about the programme



Spread the word about your workshops through your media products



Invite media representatives



Reach out to people beyond the workshop



Start conversations about democracy through your workshops



Speak with others about the programme

The work behind the scenes - different aspects at work, some examples:





Imprint

Publisher, media owner, producer: Parliamentary Administration

Basic direction: Raising awareness about democracy. Workshop Democracy

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**Parliament
Austria**

**Participants of the Democracy Workshop Forum
29 September 2023**