

REBUILDING TRUST IN EUROPE

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

On 29 and 30 October 2015 the Vienna Policy Conference, organized by the Open Society Foundations and ERSTE Foundation, brought together civil society, media, academia, policy makers and political thinkers to debate some of the most pressing issues facing Europe. This short document highlights the most thought-provoking parts of the conference presentations, panel discussions, and the Q&A sessions.

PUBLIC PLENARY SESSION

HAS THE REFUGEE CRISIS DAMAGED CITIZENS' TRUST IN THE EU PROJECT?

The public plenary focused on trust within the European Union and the implications of the current refugee crisis. Is mistrust a problem? The panel concluded that a certain level of trust in governments and institutions is essential for society to function. The opposite of trust is not mistrust: it is fear. Mistrust is an important component of a healthy, democratic, pluralistic, liberal regime.

Governments and the EU risk jeopardising trust and inducing fear if they do not act appropriately; in highly uncertain times it is their role to show leadership and reduce uncertainty to the level of reasonable risk. Regarding the refugee crisis, the panel agreed Europe's leaders should reassure citizens that the situation is manageable; focus on solutions, including any extraordinary measures; and, above all, demonstrate those solutions are being implemented. The political message needs to shift from crisis to opportunity, and positive voices about migration should be brought into the debate. Other ideas included the establishment of a permanent crisis group, able to mobilise and take decisions quickly; gathering a coalition of willing EU member states, ready to agree and implement a bold political agenda; and globalising the discussion in recognition of the global dimension of migration.

Returning to the overall theme of the conference, the panel discussed the need for more European leadership. Populist parties are successful because, thanks to their easy and clear solutions, they are able to present themselves as leaders. Member states should start encouraging strong EU leadership rather than letting their fear of strong EU institutions stand in the way. The current approach increases levels of cynicism, Euroscepticism and fear.

Most fundamentally, Europe needs a new vision: the European project was born to ensure peace; that goal being accomplished, it is time for Europe to find new grounds of its legitimacy, a new vision widely shared by its citizens. It is time for Europe to evolve from an elite project to a European demos.

NIGHT OWL SESSIONS

1) CONSPIRACY THEORIES: UNDERMINING TRUST, OR EMPOWERING THE MASSES?

Conspiracy theories derive from a lack of trust in power-holding individuals (e.g. politicians, scientists, etc.) who allegedly make sinister plans behind our backs. This night owl session discussed what draws people to conspiracy theories, the negative consequences of peoples' belief in conspiracy theories, and the role of journalism and the internet.

Healthy democracies are based on a good balance of trust and mistrust within the population but also articulated at the institutional level through a system of checks and balances. Whilst it's important that people question those who hold power and demand transparent information flows, conspiracy theories are an extreme expression of mistrust. Conspiracy theories flourish in closed societies, or in reaction to extreme events (e.g. 9/11). Are conspiracy theories harmful? Research has shown that believing in conspiracy theories makes citizens less inclined to take action—such as voting or taking measures against climate change.

There was some discussion about the consequences of the decline of journalism: a reduced capacity to report and verify facts means public trust in journalism decreases. Furthermore, the new format of journalism (short, simple, easy to digest) is perfect for perpetuating conspiracy theories. The internet both allows conspiracy theories to promulgate widely and allows counter-conspiracy theorists the space to challenge those theories.

How can we desensitise people to conspiracy theories? The session outlined three strategies to challenge conspiracy theories: (i) providing facts that oppose the conspiracy theory; (ii) ridicule the premise of the conspiracy theory; and (iii) raise empathy. Research shows providing facts was the most effective way to challenge conspiracy theories (although not for extreme conspiracy theorists). The other two methods also proved effective but again, not with extreme conspiracy theorists.

2) HOW CAN CIVIC ACTIVISM OVERCOME CYNICISM AND MISTRUST?

Trust between new forms of civic activism and traditional democratic structures (mainstream parties and established NGOs) is declining and cynicism is rising. A certain amount of mistrust, even hopelessness, has often been vital to trigger mobilisation and social change. But is the balance between trust and mistrust in danger? Has mistrust become easier to build than trust, and why?

This night owl session concluded that one-issue movements are important for breaking the wall of cynicism and mistrust, and creating opportunities. Such movements are a specific form of activism and often have more chance of achieving the desired social change, pursuing it one step at a time, than established NGOs. However, their challenge is to institutionalise themselves, particularly when the issue

that initially motivated them is partially resolved, or when, conversely, they are challenged by more radical activists who prioritise disruption over gradual change.

Whilst there are some links between established NGOs and social movements, more effective ways partnerships would help NGOs to reconnect with their roots and social movements to achieve systemic change.

One-issue movements, which are often the product of mistrust, can be instrumental to the objective of rebuilding trust, provided that traditional structures are able to build on this mobilisation and civic activists can renew and evolve their projects.

3) MOVIE SCREENING “ASH AND MONEY”

At this night owl session participants watched the film *Money and Ash* (directed by Semper and Ojasoo, and available [online](#)), which shows how in 2010 the Estonian Theatre NO99 decided to reflect widespread disgust in Estonia at political practices by creating a new political party, Unified Estonia. The Unified Estonia project, one of the largest theatre events in contemporary Europe, lasted 44 days and ended with a major Unified Estonia movement assembly, attended by more than 7500 people. Unified Estonia was a hyper-populist party that used every trick from the populist handbook, copying from existing parties and manipulating the media. With numerous interviews, press releases, poster campaigns and scandals it was constantly front page news. Nobody could really tell if it was politics or “just art” and some experts predicted that Unified Estonia would get 20% of the vote at the next elections, making many Estonian politicians extremely nervous.

After the movie screening participants briefly discussed with Tarmo Jüristo, an Estonian social activist who appears in the film. The audience enjoyed the film’s humour in portraying the weaknesses of today’s democracy and the power of civil society. Particularly interesting was how a large portion of the Estonian public treated Unified Estonia as a real political force, even when they knew there was a theatre company behind it, and that the theatre experiment made the political establishment and media very nervous. Looking back at the Unified Estonia project five years later, Jüristo pointed to the subsequent changes in the Estonian political system, and how populist parties changed their methods. Participants also briefly discussed other ways of dealing with populism, given that it is much harder to feed trust than fear.

PLENARY SESSION

HOW DO POLLING AND BIG DATA AFFECT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICIANS AND VOTERS?

Polling research measures what the public thinks. Based on the results, researchers can also look at how to persuade people to think differently. The primary purpose of political parties is to obtain political power, and they use polling research to that end. But can polling really change the results of elections?

The panel thought not: even with important technological developments, namely big data analysis, all polls can do is to provide clues as to how better to persuade voters of a specific message. Polling and research cannot replace political content or goals.

The key question for voters is always: why should I vote for this candidate? There is no substitute for a political vision and leaders who are able to promote a vision and build alliances. Polling and big data are extraordinarily effective means of collecting and analysing people's feelings and frustrations. In this sense they might also be a powerful, democratic bridge that gives voice to wider sections of the population, and in particular to citizens who do not usually have direct contact with political power. However, polls can only express demands and give voice to problems; they cannot offer solutions.

BREAK OUT SESSIONS

1) THE CHANGING EUROPEAN SOCIAL CONTRACT AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE WELFARE STATE

Is there room for real choices in economic policy in the current European context, in particular inside the Eurozone? How can democracies whose wealth accumulates in a few hands stop that economic power translating into political power?

This break-out session concluded that the European integration project has been pushing European countries, at least in more recent times, towards a neo-liberal socioeconomic model. Gradually reducing the size of the state, this system has increased economic disparities. This trend was previously counter-balanced by the existence of national welfare states. But the economic crisis broke this equilibrium, leaving the welfare state fundamentally eroded across much of the EU. The resulting economic difficulties fuelled mistrust, anti-austerity and anti-EU feelings. That is only deepened by the perception that governments have been allowing corporations to get away with failing to pay the morally appropriate level of taxation.

These feelings of mistrust have been captured by populist, often right-wing movements. The neo-liberalisation of left wing parties seems to be an unavoidable consequence of globalisation and the de-regularisation of capital markets.

European citizens have often expressed themselves against the privatisation of public services, showing a renewed support for the welfare state. Far from being economically unaffordable, the only concrete obstacle to its promotion is a lack of political will.

2) MANAGING MIGRATION AND DIVERSITY IN SOCIETY

What can community and political leaders do to alleviate the fear of change and increasing diversity? What can we learn from the British, Swedish, French, German, and other experiences with integration, inclusion, and management of diversity?

During this break-out session participants agreed the current crisis shows how important public trust is in the management of migration and diversity. European countries with higher levels of trust have been able to take braver, more effective decisions, knowing that their citizens will tolerate an initial situation of chaos. Some countries chose to portray themselves as unable to manage migration, hoping to discourage refugees from seeking asylum there. This strategy increased mistrust of citizens towards their governments and tarnished the credibility of leaders who closed their borders and violated fundamental rights.

First we should recognise that migration flows to Europe will not decline in the near future. There should be concrete, swift measures on the ground. Such measures will help governments regain the necessary trust to adopt longer-term policies on asylum and integration. Part of that would involve overhauling the European asylum system. The EU must clarify whether it sees itself as a land of temporary shelter or offering a new life. Integration policies have been neglected. Understanding why migrants move is a key element for their successful integration. Showcasing best practices and successful stories from migration management at the local level, where positive examples abound, is the keystone of this strategy.

3) ABUSES OF STATE POWER AND THE PROGRESSIVE EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTIONALISM

Why are some illiberal leaders more skilful at overcoming the wall of mistrust from their population than their liberal rivals? Why is the “illiberal alternative” so effective at online activism, blogs and other forms of mobilisation?

At this break-out session participants heard that while Eastern Europe and the Balkans have emerged from the black and white picture of the past, for some, today’s reality more resembles a “grey zone” than the full colour they may have hoped for. In Hungary the constant use of undemocratic legislative processes and attacks on civil society organisations has led to people, especially young people, disengaging from politics. In the Balkans the authorities undertake measures like silencing opposition media or transforming the State’s institutions into those of the party, building fear and intimidation among the population.

Why do these states succeed? They deliver stability, albeit through repression, creating a small powerful elite, and mobilising identity politics. Contrary to previous belief, it is clear that capitalism can survive without democracy. The process of state capture is facilitated by regional powers seeking state capture to further their own interests. And by citizens losing faith that international entities like the EU will intervene. Simultaneously the European democratic model struggles to deliver on its citizens’ high expectations. As a result, the concept of democracy itself has become negotiable.

How do we contain this phenomenon? First it is essential to re-engage civil society, starting at local level. To counter the discourse around the need for stability, we need to re-emotionalise the debate, reintroduce the value of democracy and give citizens a powerful motivation to fight for their rights.

PLENARY SESSION

STATE CAPTURE: IS ANTI-CORRUPTION REBUILDING OR DESTROYING TRUST?

Is anti-corruption delivering more accountability and trust? Are there more effective ways of transforming captured states and reviving the social trust?

At the final plenary panel the conference heard that anti-corruption campaigns can be open to abuse if misused for political interests or can be ineffective if perceived to be biased in their selection of targets. Successful anti-corruption strategies involve a combination of several transparency, prosecution and accountability mechanisms.

Transparency is an important tool for identifying problems linked to corruption or situations that, without being illegal, might threaten democracy – for example the perception of unequal access for different interest groups to the European institutions, depending on the interest they represent and the financial means at their disposal. However, transparency alone cannot prevent corruption, nor can it solve mistrust issues, if the latter is the result of a lack of moral integrity on the part of politicians or the state. Furthermore, there may be an undesired consequence of transparency campaigns that the decision-making process moves from relatively-transparent institutions to more informal and obscure practices.

Lessons learned from past anti-corruption campaigns also show that it is important that the campaigns be specific to the local context and perception of corruption; it is rarely possible to transfer a successful campaign directly from one country to another. It is also important to present anti-corruption and transparency as pre-requisites for the success of other policies, rather than end-goals in themselves. Finally, there is an important role for the EU – its support was critical to the recent anti-corruption campaign in Romania. The EU has an important moral obligation to ensure its funds neither create nor support state corruption.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Between the destruction and reconstruction of trust there should be a moment of reflection. The Vienna policy conference launched this process of reflection, raising questions and proposing new ways forward for this important debate. Wherever this journey will take us, we should not forget the fundamental questions around trust in Europe: is there a need for more trust in Europe? If both trust and mistrust are needed, how do we define the right balance? How can we avoid destroying trust without promoting unconditional faith in political institutions? How do we build and safeguard the trustworthiness of our institutions?