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Parliamentary Administration

Day of Parliamentary Research 2026

Report of the panel discussion: “How can we make
democracy feel good?”

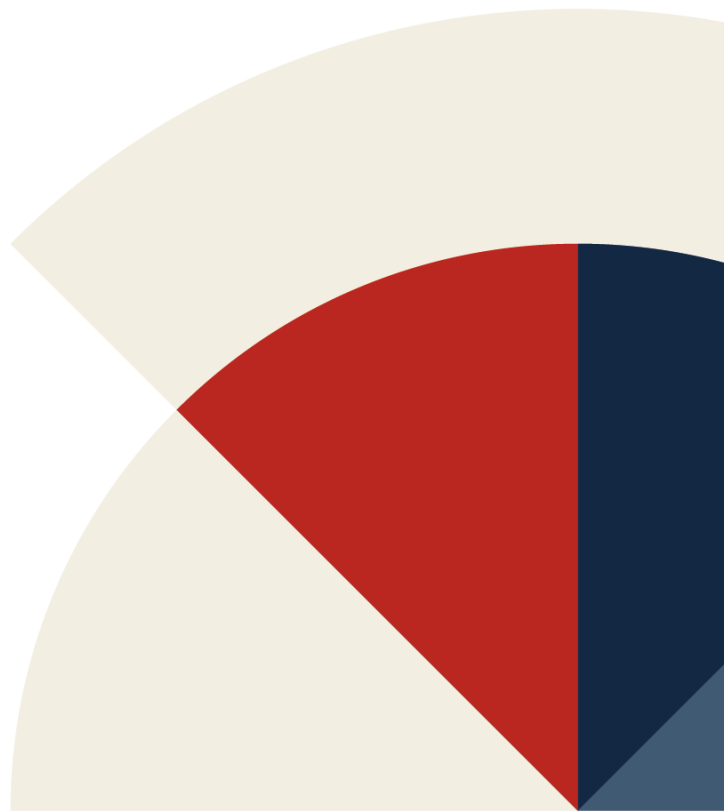
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Dep. 3.2 – Research and Support in Parliamentary Matters

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Overview

The panel discussion was moderated by Daniela Ingruber, a renowned researcher specialising in democracy, dystopian democracy, political education, fake news, ethical journalism and conflict transformation, as well as political and dramaturgical consultant, and author. Her guests included Olga Kosanović, a director, screenwriter and teacher, Georg Renner, a journalist for Datum, Wiener Zeitung and Missing Link, and Maria Stopfner, a senior researcher at the University of Innsbruck and the Institute for Applied Linguistics at EURAC Research in Bolzano, Italy.

Synopsis

The final item of the Day of Parliamentary Research brought together individuals from various backgrounds who approach the subjects of emotions and politics in distinctive ways. Above all, the aim was to open up new perspectives, questions and areas for future discussion.

Initial thoughts: How can we make democracy feel good?

Daniela Ingruber opened the discussion by inviting the participants to reflect on the panel's central theme, "How can we make democracy feel good?", and share their initial perspectives.

Olga Kosanović started by emphasising that the panel's overarching question itself assumes a level of privilege that not everyone enjoys. Around 25% of people living in Austria do not hold Austrian citizenship and are therefore unable to participate in many important aspects of democracy. Before asking whether democracy feels good, she argued, people must first feel that they are part of it. Drawing on her own experience as someone without voting rights, she explained that the central question for her is not "Do I feel good about democracy?" but rather "Do I feel seen? Am I visible within this democracy?" Many residents who cannot vote, experience



democracy as something that excludes them, leaving them feeling invisible despite living in and contributing to society. Reflecting on her most recent documentary project, titled 'Noch lange kein Lippizaner', she described how speaking with many people in similar situations transformed her perspective. Instead of seeing herself as an isolated case, she discovered a large community of people who shared the same experiences. Bringing these voices together fostered a sense of collective identity and belonging, demonstrating the importance of recognition and visibility in democratic life.

Georg Renner, on the other hand, challenged the starting point of the discussion by asking whether democracy should feel good at all. He argued that democracy is essentially a means of managing conflict, and that political disagreement, struggle and competing interests are not signs of democratic failure, but rather key characteristics of a functioning democracy. Rather than striving for comfort or harmony, he believes that democracy should facilitate the peaceful, transparent and constructive unfolding of conflict.. When asked whether excessive harmony might make citizens complacent, he agreed that this was a genuine risk. Excessive harmony, he argued, can push disagreements "under the rug," whereas open political contestation allows problems to become visible and addressed collectively. He therefore suggested that democracy should be rewarding rather than 'feeling good', as it provides individuals with the opportunity to make their voices heard.

Maria Stopfner argued that before asking how democracy should feel, it is first necessary to clarify what people actually mean by "democracy," as the term is often too abstract and interpreted differently by different individuals. Regardless of these differing interpretations, she noted that democratic systems generally continue to enjoy broad public support. However, she also expressed concern that political actors may deliberately seek to undermine these positive attitudes by portraying democracy as ineffective or undesirable. In response to a question about the connection between "feeling good" to dignity and identity, she argued that feeling good within a democratic system is closely linked to a sense of respect and recognition. People who believe their voices matter are more likely to identify positively with democracy,



whereas exclusion creates disconnection and alienation. Consequently, democracy is strengthened when everyone feels genuinely included in public debate.

Democracy, community and political parties

Drawing on her research on social media, Maria Stopfner observed that although online political discussions are often characterised by anger and fear, they can also provide grounds for hope by offering an optimistic outlook for the future and enabling like-minded individuals to connect. She argued that hope, brought in by political parties, is particularly powerful because people are often more strongly motivated by the possibility of creating positive change than by merely preventing negative developments.

Georg Renner partly disagreed. While acknowledging that political parties inevitably create communities, he argued that fostering a sense of community is not their primary purpose. Rather, political parties exist to promote competing visions of societies through their programmes and ideologies. They help protect freedom and human rights and provide people with democratic means of effecting change, while democratic institutions provide the framework within which they pursue this claim.

Olga Kosanović, drawing on her experience of working with younger generations, observed that many young people perceive democracy as an abstract and distant concept. Although they are often overwhelmed or alarmed by messages suggesting that democratic systems are broken, she rejected the idea that they are apathetic about politics. Instead, she argued that many young people care deeply about political issues because they want to help shape a better future. As many are first-time voters, they often become frustrated when older generations accuse them of lacking political engagement. She concluded that society has a responsibility to ensure that everyone who wishes to participate has meaningful opportunities to do so.

Georg Renner reinforced this argument by emphasising the role of the media. Rather than simply convincing citizens of the value of democracy, media organisations should help people to understand how democratic institutions work. In order to understand



their place within the political system and compare competing political claims analytically, citizens need the knowledge and tools to do so.

Personal reflections: When does democracy feel good?

In the final round, each panellist reflected personally on when democracy makes them feel good.

Georg Renner told that he feels encouraged when democratic institutions function as intended. Seeing constitutional checks and balances operate effectively boosts his confidence in democracy. However, he stressed that constitutions are not designed to make citizens happy. Instead, they establish the legal and ethical framework within which people can build good lives for each other. Participation and active engagement are therefore moral responsibilities for every citizen.

Maria Stopfner emphasised that she would become suspicious if democracy ever felt entirely harmonious. A democracy without disagreement, conflict, or public debate would suggest that something had gone wrong. Furthermore, she highlighted that citizens need to understand the significance of their active role within democracy, and that education is the primary means of achieving this.

Olga Kosanović concluded by highlighting the issue of freedom of expression and solidarity. Accordingly, democracy feels meaningful when everyone has a voice for expressing their opinions, dares to criticise those in power, and stands in solidarity with those who live within society but are excluded from formal democratic participation.