

## The EU Integration Forum 2015

### *Concept Note*

#### **Restoring faith in Democracy: How to reverse the tide of Disillusionment and Disengagement?**

Manchester, 24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> of September 2015

The EU Integration Forum is a ground-breaking initiative launched by the Robert Bosch Stiftung to bring together some **80 young leaders from all 28 EU Members States and all levels of government** once a year to debate the challenges facing the European Union, and to create an EU-wide network of young leaders and thinkers committed to helping shape the Union's future. Now in its fifth year, the Forum has demonstrated its value as a **highly interactive platform** for exchanging views on the **key issues facing the EU now and in the future**, when Europe will be looking to this younger generation to provide the leadership and vision so desperately needed to meet the many serious challenges confronting us.

This year, the Forum will focus on the crucial question of **how to restore faith in democracy**, amid widespread evidence of public disillusionment with traditional political parties, political elites and policy-making processes in many EU countries. In the wake of the economic, financial and social crisis which has rocked Europe to its foundations, many people are turning instead to 'anti-establishment' parties, protest movements or away from politics altogether - a trend which is already posing already major challenges to political systems and political actors both in individual member states and across the EU as a whole.

The Forum's unique approach - bringing together young leaders from the political, business, policy and think tank worlds, and from across the EU and every level of government from the local and regional to the national and European - in this highly interactive format will give participants the opportunity to exchange views on this hugely important issue and consider how best to reverse the tide and restore public confidence in politics and politicians, and thus their faith in democracy.

The popularity of the Forum means that every year, it welcomes back participants from previous years as well as attracting new ones, so we do hope that you will consider signing up to this year's event via the Forum website: [www.euif.eu](http://www.euif.eu)



"EU Integration Forum – Incentives for the Union" is a project of the Robert Bosch Stiftung, organised by IFOK GmbH

For more information, pictures and to join the network, visit [www.euif.eu](http://www.euif.eu)

The EU Integration Forum moves around the Union every year as part of its mission to promote genuine transnational dialogue. The first two gatherings of these rising stars in the EU's political firmament took place in Germany and Italy, two EU founding member states, in 2011 and 2012, with participants first discussing whether there was a need for a new 'pact' to reconnect the EU with its citizens and then focusing on whether the emergence of a two-speed Europe was inevitable in the wake of the euro-zone crisis and what implications this might have for the EU's future. In 2013, participants travelled to a relatively new member state, the Czech Republic, to discuss Europe's place in a rapidly changing world and how to ensure it can punch its weight on the international stage. In 2014, the Forum moved to crisis-hit Spain, and to the city of Barcelona, to talk about how best to tackle youth unemployment, amid mounting fears of a 'lost generation' in Europe with potentially devastating social consequences. This year, the Forum will be held in Manchester, in the UK, where the anti-EU UK Independence Party beat the traditional parties to come first in the May 2014 European elections, prompting predictions that one of the EU's largest member states could be headed for the EU exit door within a few years, with profound consequences for Europe as a whole.

***Theme of the EUIF in 2015:***

***Restoring faith in democracy: how to reverse the tide of disillusionment and disengagement?***

The economic, financial and resulting social crisis has been the catalyst for a significant backlash against traditional political parties in many EU countries, with many people regarding national and European politicians as being at least partly to blame for the crisis and/or failing to deliver an effective response when it happened.

Perhaps the starkest illustration of this loss of faith in democracy and mainstream political parties came in the May 2014 elections to the European Parliament, which saw populist parties win almost one in five seats in the assembly on the lowest ever turnout for a European election at just 42.5%. Most recently, the dramatic rise to power of the anti-austerity radical left party Syriza in Greece has been heralded as a 'political earthquake' which has sent shockwaves reverberating around Europe. In some countries, the crisis has spawned protest movements too, with people taking the streets to make their voices heard, such as Los Indignados in Spain.

It is against this backdrop that incoming European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker began his mandate by launching an "Agenda for jobs, growth, fairness and democratic change", insisting that he saw rebuilding bridges in Europe to restore citizens confidence and strengthen the EU's democratic legitimacy as his key task.

Political parties play a key role in well-functioning democracies, but this anti-establishment trend suggests an increasing 'disconnect' between Europe's citizens and its political elites.

So what are the underlying causes of this loss of faith in the way democracy is working in Europe? Is the resulting success of populist parties and fragmentation of the political system a temporary phenomenon, or is it likely to become a permanent feature of the modern political landscape? What can be done to address the concerns that have prompted this loss of public confidence in national democratic systems and in the EU, and what will the consequences be if Europe fails to address this issue effectively at all levels of governance?

These are the key questions that delegates will be discussing at the 2015 EU Integration Forum in Manchester on 24-25 September.

They will first consider the root causes of what some have described as a 'crisis of democracy' and then discuss ways to tackle this, focusing on four key areas:

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- The need for a renewed focus on **good governance**, to address the concerns of those who blame poor standards of public administration, corruption and a lack of transparency for allowing the crisis to happen, and for what they perceive as the failure of governments to meet their needs when it did.
- A rising tide of **regionalism and separatism** in some countries, with separatist movements in some parts of the EU fuelled by a sense of alienation from national capitals and traditional political parties, coupled with the prospect that one of the EU's biggest member states could be heading for the exit door.
- The importance of finding new ways and platforms to foster greater **public involvement and civic engagement** in politics and political debates, to overcome the widening gap between the public and political elites.
- How to uphold **EU values**, amid concern that we are witnessing a slide towards authoritarianism, a growing lack of respect for human rights and a rising tide of intolerance in some EU countries.

These issues will be discussed in plenary and breakout sessions, with the focus on coming up with practical ideas and suggestions to address all of these issues.

## Programme for the 2015 Forum

### Day One

***Pre-conference workshop:*** Before the conference begins, participants will be invited to attend a workshop designed to explore key aspects of this issue and offers practical examples on the theme of the Forum which enable practitioners to share their insights with participants through concrete project examples.

This year's workshop will focus on the issue of civic engagement and its role in rebuilding trust in democracy, and will be implemented by The Democratic Society (Demsoc), a UK-based membership organisation whose goal is to make democracy work for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They will showcase their pioneering work on the "NHS Citizen" project, identifying ways to create and maintain spaces for engagement on complex policy issues, and the potential of such new mechanisms of governance in other contexts and countries. Additionally, they will offer insights from their work on collaborative government in the context of the Scottish referendum and its application to the EU.

***Conference reception and dinner:*** The conference will start with a dinner to welcome participants and launch the debate with a keynote speech - ideally by a leading European figure with relevant experience in this area - to outline whether (s)he believes democracy is in crisis, as many fear; what lies behind this public loss of faith in the traditional political system; and what the consequences could be if Europe fails to address this. A short informal moderated debate with participants over dinner will follow, to provide some initial food for thought for the next day's discussions. This 'on the record' session – which will take place at Manchester's National Football Museum, a venue which reflects the city's strong identification with football and symbolises its regeneration after the IRA bombing of 1996 - may be attended by journalists to cover the speech and subsequent discussion. The following conference will be held under Chatham House rules to allow for a frank and open exchange of views.

## Day Two

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**Opening plenary:** The 75-minute discussion in the opening plenary will set the stage for the break-out sessions. This will be a highly interactive session with a panel of 4-5 speakers representing the different layers of the EU's multi-level governance system and a speaker from a youth organisation. There will be no opening statements from the panellists and the moderator will ensure that as many participants as possible are given the opportunity to contribute to the discussion with their comments and questions.

Questions to be addressed in this session include:

- What are the underlying causes of the loss of faith in the way democracy is working in Europe?
- Is the resulting fragmentation of the political system a temporary phenomenon or is it likely to become a permanent feature of the modern political landscape? What are the implications of this?
- What can be done to address the concerns that have prompted this loss of public confidence in national democratic systems and in the EU?
- What will the consequences be if Europe fails to address this issue effectively at all levels of governance?

**Break-out sessions:** Parallel break-out sessions before and after lunch will explore this issue in more detail and in smaller groups to give as many participants as possible the chance to contribute to the debate.

Participants will be asked to register in advance for the breakout session they wish to attend, choosing between four specific topics:

- Good governance and transparency
- Regionalism and separatism
- Civic engagement
- European Values

These sessions will begin with an 8-10 minute introduction from an expert in the relevant field, who will also act as rapporteur for the sessions. Each group will then spend the first half of the session defining the problem, and the rest discussing and developing possible solutions. Expert facilitators will be tasked with moderating the break-out sessions and will be given a set of key questions to address, to be developed before the event in coordination with the rapporteurs. The rapporteur will also be tasked with preparing a summary of the discussion to be presented at the closing plenary session.

**Afternoon plenary:** The afternoon session will begin with reports back from the rapporteurs of the break-out sessions, followed by a general discussion of the outcomes with the audience steered by the moderator, focusing first on the results of the discussions on defining the problem and then on the potential solutions developed by the groups, giving all participants a chance to contribute to the discussion on all the four issues and also seeking to draw some cross-cutting conclusions from all four debates.

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The ideas and suggestions that emerge from the discussions will be captured on flipcharts, and a brief summary of the key points sent to participants by email the next day, to be followed by a fuller report to be produced after the Forum, with input from the breakout session rapporteurs and facilitators, and distributed to participants.