

Fighting populism by creating optimism to act – a role for civil society?

What can foundations do better than others to defend, strengthen and develop democracy, something that is urgently needed for a diverse, open and future-oriented society?

10 proposals based on our own experiences

1. **Strengthening trust / creating linkage or a bridge in terms of “cultural islands”– Havelock’s model for social change;** forms of communication that restore trust in institutions and strengthen tolerance of ambiguity in a pluralistic society. E.g. 10 years of cross-sectoral discussions centered around the long-term study on group-focused hostility together with Bielefeld University and the development of a research-based program called "Living Equality" together with the Ford Foundation
2. **Support for and co-operation with representatives of minorities:** minorities such as Roma, LGBTI or refugees are the first victims of populism. That is why Freudenberg Foundation invests in the first and until now only foundation for Roma people in Germany.
3. **Creating paradigmatic models of change:** e.g. trying out how social segregation and democratic decline can be reversed by magnet schools in economically disadvantaged areas, e.g. One Square Mile.
4. **Investing in evidence / research on what works and what the consequences of political decisions are** (e.g. Council on Migration Germany as a network of 150 researchers)
5. **Programs that invest in the democratic competence of young people:** e.g. service-learning programs in schools in conjunction with members of local or federal parliaments to familiarize them with democratic processes and allow them to learn from their own political experience
6. **Advocacy:** creating dialogs among civil society protagonists, e.g. in preparation for the German summit conference on integration under the direction of the German Chancellor (Integrationsgipfel)

7. **Pioneering role for new challenges:** how can we combine learning democracy and applying digital knowledge in schools? Negotiations with the German Conference of Ministers of Education and our own model projects: e.g. “internet revolt”

8. **Active listening:** open discussions with opinion-leaders in politics, administration, academia, civil society, e.g. the pilot project Homeland. Democracy.Saxony, where the Freudenberg Foundation invited Bosch to share a tour of round tables

9. **Transparency on our own values and attitudes:** following James Baldwin’s article “In search of a majority”, it is absolutely necessary to prevent a moral vacuum on humanitarian challenges arising – otherwise populists can fill this vacuum with simplistic ideology, not least with group-focused hostility. The clear approach of a (in Germany well-known) coach of RB Leipzig is a good example: zero tolerance for racism, and investment in social and educational infrastructure, were his advice in a public dialog with the Prime Minister of Saxony.

10. **Strengthening the role of independent fact-based media:** in times when checks and balances tend to be dysfunctional, the role of the media is crucial: as the fourth estate, the media, not least the social media, can shape public assessment of present developments. “Letters to Karl-Heinz” is a German example of a journalist from Spiegel online possessing the competence to conduct a constructive dialogue with populism. (Media Service, CIVIS)

My core question is:

How, in particular, can foundations as theoretically autonomous protagonists in Germany and all over Europe use their power together to say loudly and effectively YES to democracy and to a peaceful future, and NO to hate speech and populism? What can we do together to halt negative megatrends?

Dr. Pia Gerber, Freudenberg Foundation