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DAY 2 - 13:00 - Main Stage
Democracy Fitness

JULIA THOMASCHKI & ACHIM WÖLFL - Mehr Demokratie

Session recap

At a glance

After lunch, democracy fitness trainers Julia Thomaschki and Achim Wölfl turned the hall into a 'democracy gym' marked out with cones. The premise: disagreeing is normal and essential in a democracy, but it feels uncomfortable face to face because people seek harmony, while online disagreement is easy and often harsh. Like a muscle, the ability to disagree respectfully can be trained. Participants went through a physical warm-up and four exercises: a for-or-against positioning game, 'disagreement ping pong', an 'I disagree with you because' round, and a closing round of compliments.

Key messages

- Disagreement is one of the most basic features of democracy. It is about issues, not about whether we like the other person.
- People tend to avoid disagreement in person and overdo it online. Respectful disagreement is a skill that can be practised.
- You do not need to agree to end a disagreement well. Appreciating how the other person argued is enough to leave on good terms.
- Visible minorities matter: those who stand on the less popular side make a room more representative of real democratic life.
- The skill transfers to everyday life, from the kitchen table to the workplace.

Facts, figures and references

- Polarising questions used: pineapple on pizza, Oktoberfest, free public transport, a 90 km/h speed limit, Söder versus Merz as chancellor, open-by-default government data, and banning meat.
- Oktoberfest produced the closest to a 50/50 split and was used for the paired exercises.

Takeaways for the community

- Short, playful formats can lower the threshold for practising difficult democratic skills with diverse groups.
- The format could be reused in participation processes, trainings or council meetings as an ice-breaker before contentious topics.