AFP

Austrians combat polarisation with table talk

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Thu 14 August 2025 at 4:38 am CEST
3 min read

Since last year, the dinners bring together people with diverse backgrounds and views (Alex HALADA)
Alex HALADA/AFP/AFP

A policeman, an artist and a wealth portfolio manager. They don't know each other and yet end up sharing a meal, as part of an Austrian initiative aimed at combating polarisation.

The dinners are held in Vienna to bring together people with diverse backgrounds and views, who are willing to step out of their comfort zone for the evening.

"Since the pandemic and with the current wars under way, I have lost friends because of divergent opinions," Cornelia Grotte told AFP after accepting the

offer to meet complete strangers and socialise.

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"We have retreated to our social bubbles instead," added the 32-year-old who works in the media.

Grotte was among around twenty people dining at tables for six in the square in front of the Vienna City Hall earlier this month after applying for a sought-after spot.

- Breaking the ice -

While apps already exist to bring strangers together for dinner, such as Timeleft, the project aims to set itself apart from the online world, where critics say algorithms exacerbate polarisation by keeping internet users locked in ideological bubbles.

"In this age of social media, it is very important to say things to people directly, to interact in reality and not hiding behind a screen," said Austrian comedian Linda Hold, who was invited as celebrity guest to facilitate the evening.

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Everything is free of charge at the dinner, hosted this time by the City Hall on the fringes of an open-air festival.

The only condition is that participants must bring along someone else with a different background, be it sexual orientation, age, religion, political views or living standard.

Grotte asked a friend from Iran, who moved to Austria in 2013, if she would accompany her. Hesitant for a while, her colleague Neda Saffar finally agreed to come along.

"As a woman with migration background and an accent, I don't usually dare contradict my partners in conversation, and they are increasingly prejudiced," Saffar, 35, said.

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To break the ice, the organisers equip each participant with two questions designed to get conversation under way.

As the evening progresses, laughs are fast to come, and when divergent views occur, diners treat each other with respect, like when they discuss the hot issue of integrating non-German speakers in public schools.

- 'Sense of belonging' -

"These encounters require you to step out of your comfort zone," said Katharina Jeschke, head of the group Austria of Round and Square Tables set up to organise the dinners.

"Many participants say that initially they don't know who to bring, because they are always stuck with the same acquaintances... The table offers a sense of belonging."

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The idea for the project was conceived last year when politicians' violent verbal clashes during election campaigns in Western countries revealed how much people were losing respect for each other, Jeschke said.

In Austria, the far-right Freedom Party (FPOe) won the September elections for the first time ever though they failed to form government.

The project was devised by the Innsbruck bishop and two Vienna-based members of the Emmanuel Community, an international Catholic initiative promoting dialogue since the 1970s.

At the end of the event, the participants relish having "learnt things" as they exchange phone numbers with their new acquaintances, encouraged to organise similar meet-ups on their own to help everyone find a place at a table.

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