Event Report

Communication to members (vertical sidebar text)

Citizens first! How to revive democratic participation for a citizens-led Europe

FutureLab Europe Spring Conference – 22 April 2016

Summary

The gap between citizens and governments is widening, with alarmingly low levels of electoral participation across many EU member states. Widespread lack of trust in national governments and European institutions have pushed citizens further away from traditional parties towards anti-systemic ones and recent scandals such as the Panama Papers have only reinforced mistrust in the political class. Attempts to strengthen citizens' voices in the EU political arena, such as the European Citizens' Initiative, have not delivered the desired results. What can be done to reverse this trend? How can citizens be brought back to the centre-stage of policy-making? Can the EU be a trailblazer in promoting more participatory democracy? This conference provided FutureLab Europe representatives Ivo Visak and Simona Pronckutė with the opportunity to present the new FutureLab Europe publication, which analyses the causes of citizen disengagement and disillusion with the EU. The report explores the role of European political culture, technology, direct democracy mechanisms, civic education and transparency in reviving people's participation in and enthusiasm for the European project. Visak and Pronckutė then engaged in a debate with Antonio Silva Mendes, Director for Youth and Sport, DG Education and Culture, European Commission, and Sven Giegold, MEP for the Greens.

Full Report

Claire Dhéret, Programme Leader of FutureLab Europe, European Policy Centre (EPC), opened by explaining that FutureLab Europe is a programme for young people designed to foster debate and to bridge the gap between young people and policy makers. The recent publication is addressed to policy makers at the EU level and aims to put citizens back at the centre of the decision-making process. Dhéret also presented the social media campaign that has been carried out by the FutureLabbers in preparation to the conference. As part of this campaign, the programme encouraged young people to raise their voice and to tell why they consider it important to participate in democracy or why they do not participate in our political system. Results of the campaign can be seen by following the hashtag #Iparticipate.

Ivo Visak, FutureLab Europe participant and co-author of 'Bring back the citizens! How to revive democratic participation for a citizens-led Europe' set out the publication's key main messages and ideas. He said that an urgent response was needed to address the dysfunction of our political system and the growing distrust between citizens and their representatives. Similar trends are to be seen both at the national and European level, as the growing support for new emerging and anti-systemic parties and the ever lowest turnout in the last European elections have been revealing. There are many ways to revive democracy in Europe and the EU should take the lead in this battle according to Visak. This would be a very powerful way to increase the EU's legitimacy and regain support for the European project. In addition, there should be a sense of urgency for everyone who values the European project, he said, before mentioning the five key chapters of the report. These covered changing the political culture in Europe; using the new technologies to improve governance; making a better use of tools of direct democracy at the EU level, such as the European Citizens' Initiative; improving civic education; as well as increasing transparency and tackling corruption. The EU must act now or there will be much bigger problems down the road, he concluded.

Antonio Silva Mendes, Director for Youth and Sport, DG Education and Culture, European Commission, next discussed what the Commission was doing to address these challenges. He said that he had actually expected the report to go even further in its recommendations given the extent of the problems currently facing Europe in terms of inclusion, participation and unemployment, though he agreed with most diagnoses. While lots of good papers have been produced, he said, there needs to be more concrete actions, and he urged young people to involve themselves more actively. Also, Silva Mendes highlighted the need to act collectively and to increase participation, in particular of young people, at the local level. In addition, he pointed out that the EU needs to consider a cross-sectoral approach that integrates policies and involves municipalities.

Sven Giegold, Member of the European Parliament, addressed the growing disconnect between citizens and representatives, and how the EU institutions can re-establish trust. Giegold said that as a policy maker he has seen the positive effects of European democracy, such as tougher controls on banks and financial markets, but also the limits to this power along with pressure from vested interests. Also, he highlighted an imbalance of influence between stakeholders who represent industrial and financial interests and the ones representing citizens.

He identified the main subject of the report as why some parts of society have lost trust in the European project. The key, he said, was ensuring that people feel democracy serves their interests, and that they can have a say. Giegold stressed that this point was not specific to the EU, and that there was a clear crisis of legitimacy across western democracies. The speed of modernisation and integration of the global market has led to winners and losers, with huge opportunities for many, but with others left behind. This has led to parts of society feeling further away from each other than ever. Democracy can only function at the level of social equality, and by this, Giegold said, he meant a feeling of togetherness.

In order to tackle the issue of trust, then one must tackle the divisions within society, he said. In terms of what Europe can do, Giegold suggested an Erasmus scheme to be made available to all young people, giving everyone the chance to spend a year in another European country. There should also be stronger investment at the European level for 'future sectors' such as education, health and green technologies in order to maintain competitiveness and create jobs.

Another key issue, said Giegold, was that the European institutions are still based on the lowest denominator of nation states; there is no European common interest that prevails and decisions are decided behind the Council's closed doors where each country blocks the other. This is one reason why crises are piling up, and why common policy outcomes are not there. This means there is a constant struggle between the common good and the nation states. Giegold said that he hoped that the Brexit vote might force many member states to think whether they want to let Europe weaken or whether they are ready to share more sovereignty in a more democratic way. This of course would require a change in the treaties, but we need true European decision-making, he said. Ultimately, people participate if they feel that their participation changes things; Giegold called on FutureLab to think more about addressing the social gap.

Simona Pronckutė, FutureLab Europe participant and co-author of the publication, discussed the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). There have been many obstacles, she said, with only three out of 56 having collected over 1 million signatures. This shows the difficulty of mobilising citizens, and also the lack of knowledge about this initiative. People defending an ECI are no professional campaigners but volunteers. It is therefore hard for people to commit to volunteering for up to two years, and difficult for people to feel they are making an impact. The Stop TTIP initiative, for example, has collected over 3 million signatures, but the Commission has not reacted. This shows a lack of recognition, and underlines the disconnect between citizens and policy makers. The questions are according to **Pronckutė** how to upscale such an instrument, how to increase its efficiency and moreover how to ensure that it also reaches out to disadvantaged citizens?

Visak agreed with Pronckutė that participation was important, and that being involved can lead to knowledge. While certain EU programmes have indeed been created, it has proved difficult to involve everyone. Silva Mendes added that the intention of the Erasmus+ programme was indeed to be an Erasmus for all, by combining excellence and inclusion. He agreed that there is a need for a more cross-sectoral approach to encouraging citizen participation.

Discussion

Questions from the floor included the merits of creating a digital platform for encouraging participation, the need for a revolution in education, the need for the European institutions to focus on fixing their own problems first and the benefits of integrating existing projects. Questions also focused upon what a European public sphere means in practice and how funding should be organised. **Silva Mendes** said that the idea of a platform was an interesting approach, and that the Commission was interested in reformulating its online presence to be more interactive. Such initiatives can also be supported under Erasmus+, he added, and can receive funding.

Giegold said that one key tension in the report was the call for more politicisation, while at the same time calling for a European space. In order to revive participation, Giegold said that people needed to take up a position and be prepared to fight for it. People must be allowed to have different views, he added, noting that this is what happens at the national level. In order to revive European democracy, we cannot replace the struggle of ideas; we need a European space as a space where people take up positions, he said. **Giegold** pointed out that there are no true European-wide parties, and called for civil society to organise across borders. Fighting for ideas across borders in contradiction to others would represent a true living European democracy, he concluded. **Silva Mendes** added that the Commission has launched a database on different projects, which citizens can visit to see what is going on.

Giegold agreed that while the EU and European citizenship should be on curricula, it was too easy to say simply that young people and education can solve the problem. This is not enough to explain why so many young people vote for the extreme right, he said. The social and economic reasons behind why young people are losing hope in how our society is run must be examined.

A number of other FutureLab contributors commented from the floor, saying that they agreed about the need to address divisions in society. They questioned how the EU could be a part of the solution and whether direct elections might give the EU more legitimacy. Other questions from the floor touched upon why Citizens' Initiatives appear to have been ignored by the Commission.

Giegold said that while member states have been able to create welfare states, Europe with its small budget has only been able to do a little with its regional and social funds. Nonetheless, Europe can contribute towards togetherness and should think about a common tax system that closes loopholes. Furthermore, the Eurozone needs a larger budget for investment in 'future sectors', which would help to stabilise European democracy. He disagreed with the point that everyone has profited from the EU, saying that people need to reflect on that. Many people feel that their wages have not developed in parallel to those with higher education, and feel they are competing with migrants and a global working class.

Silva Mendes suggested that one positive sign was that more and more young people were becoming mobile, and that much mobility was conducted outside of education. This shows that something positive is happening. **Pronckutė** agreed that the Commission should not ignore Citizens' Initiatives, as these were all about cross-border cooperation and about the empowerment of young people. She also agreed that funding should focus on long-term projects that have a bigger impact, pointing out that the impact on those from disadvantaged backgrounds can be huge.

Final questions touched upon young people contributing to the political sphere and whether travelling in Europe was enough to build trust. **Silva Mendes** pointed out that travelling was not the same as tourism, and that through Erasmus and various volunteering programmes, young people can participate in trans-border initiatives. These schemes give young people more competences and languages and increase their employability, which they realise under the EU umbrella.

Giegold said that participation depends on having the means. The German Greens for example has one of the younger delegations in Parliament, because young people have won the struggle to get on the list. You have to organise he said, because power will never be given away. **Giegold** also agreed with criticisms of the Citizens' Initiative, saying that people will not participate if they do not feel they are taken seriously. The Commission should be using citizens' voices to re-legitimise the European project.

Visak mentioned that openness was the key, and suggested that the EU should reflect on the idea of making Council meetings more open. There is a constant disconnect between policy makers and citizens, who are left wondering why they should care. **Pronckutė** said that she would like to see greater investment in and promotion of civil society movements in order to encourage participatory democracy.

Dhéret concluded by saying that both the FutureLab Europe publication as well as the debate have pointed out some common trends across Europe and similar symptoms in our political systems. Social anger and distress transcend national borders and we are facing a crisis of representative democracy. All this highlights the need for European solutions and reinforce the call on the EU to take a more active role in supporting the emergence of a more inclusive and participative democracy.