

What role for young people in protecting democracy in Europe?

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Summary

Over the past few years, alarmingly low levels of electoral participation by citizens have been registered in many EU member states, including at the European elections of 2014. Young Europeans, in particular, are increasingly disengaged from mainstream politics, with evidence from Eurobarometer showing that the percentage of Europeans aged 15-30 who voted in an election plummeted from 80% in 2011, to 73% in 2013, and to 63% in 2015. This does not mean that young people do not care about the common good; increasing numbers of young people are shaping reality around them through volunteering, signing petitions and contributing to NGOs. Whilst this is positive, their growing absence from mainstream politics raises serious questions about the sustainability of representative democracy in the long run.

What is the underlying cause of young people's disengagement from mainstream politics? What is the most urgent measure to restore their trust in the European project? How can social movements and activism of young people be turned into political power? And finally, how can we reach out to the disengaged? FutureLab Europe members Thomas Baumgartner, Leticia Diez Sanchez, Janosch Delcker, and Darija Maric debated these and other questions with Brando Benifei, Member of the European Parliament, Elisa Lironi, Digital Democracy and Campaigning Manager at the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS), and Artur Wiczorek, Secretary General of the Federation of Young European Greens. The event marked the programme's fifth anniversary and was moderated by FutureLab Europe Programme Leader, Claire Dhéret.

Full Report

Claire Dhéret, FutureLab Europe Programme Leader, European Policy Centre, welcomed the panellists to the event and gave the floor to **Jacob Düringer, Program Officer at the Robert Bosch Foundation**. He presented the new course of the FutureLab Europe programme, which will aim to engage more and more young people in promoting European citizenship outside of Brussels. He acknowledged that EU debates often take place in a narrow circle, which must be expanded to include disengaged youth. **Dhéret** highlighted two ongoing trends: first, the reduction of youth electoral participation at a national and European level; and second, the growing support among young voters for new political parties, most often Eurosceptic or on an extreme side of the political spectrum. She questioned young peoples' perception of these two trends and the role that they can play in opposing them. This event followed a new format, by which the speakers addressed four questions under the title. Their answers were timed and followed directly by a discussion with the audience.

1. What is the underlying cause of young people's disengagement from mainstream politics?

Darija Maric, Member of FutureLab Europe, spoke first, stressing that whilst young people may not be voting, they are politically active in other sectors of society, such as in NGOs and citizenship initiatives, as well as through new means, like online via social media. According to her, young people do not vote because they feel that they are not taken seriously and that they cannot make any difference. They feel manipulated and used by certain parties, who promise a lot to young people but fail to deliver once elected. Furthermore, issues such as education and job opportunities, which are close to young people, have less space in the public debate. This leads to a decline in their trust in politics as the outcome never seems to

change. With regards to the EU, she added that young people's lack of knowledge about its complex structure is a deterrent to their political participation at European level. **Brando Benifei, Member of the European Parliament**, spoke next, claiming that the root of youth disengagement lies in the lack of credibility of traditional parties. This is due firstly to the inability of too many politicians to respect their electoral promises and to act coherently with their values, and secondly to a structural problem, in that national policy-makers' choices are often constrained by challenges that go beyond national borders. Due to a distrust in politicians, young people feel that they are unable to influence politics today. **Benifei** called for a reforming of Europe to strengthen its positive impact on people's daily lives.

Artur Wiczorek, Secretary General, Federation of Young European Greens, followed on to stress the need for people to be irrational, passionate, idealistic, and to think in terms of a wider society as engagement in politics largely depend on this ability to think more widely. **Elisa Lironi, Digital Democracy and Campaigning Manager, European Citizen Action Service**, said that youth disengagement results from socio-economic factors and the inability of politicians to reach out to young people in the digital age. Today's individualistic society, she continued, strays from the previous collectivism and lacks the sense of community that encourages people to participate in mainstream politics. The digital native millennials are very cynical and do not trust politicians, she added. It is not enough now for a politician to be on Twitter; young people want interaction instead of unilateral monologues.

Discussion

In response to a question from the audience on an alternative way to approach young people, **Lironi** explained that digital democracy must not be confused with direct democracy, as the former is to be considered as a complementary instrument to representative democracy. **Maric** added that direct democracy may function in small areas, yet history shows that it is unmanageable and unsustainable at country level. In answer to a comment from the audience on the overwhelming presence of young people in the room discussing such a topic amongst likeminded peers, **Benifei** reiterated the need to talk to young people outside of the euro bubble. He added that the inability of politicians has led to the idea that politics does not work, and called for institutional change in the face of systemic problems. The failures, he said, are down to the political structure of the EU.

On the blaming of politics and the system, and the role of other actors such as NGOs, **Lironi** reinforced that in this digital era, there is a crisis in civil society that has led to a lack of sense of community. There are not, she stressed, sufficient funds to implement grass root projects on a large scale. She added her frustration over the fact that whilst her organisation tests and recommends on issues, there is rarely any follow-up by politicians. She pointed to journalists and lobby groups as big influencers on young peoples' current disillusionment. **Maric** shared her view that young people are more likely to be involved in NGOs than in political parties, where they feel that their voice is heard and that they can make more of a difference.

2. What is the most urgent measure to restore young people's trust in the European project?

Janosch Delcker, Member of FutureLab Europe, joined the panel and addressed this question from the point of view of a journalist. An urgent measure, he said, would be more cooperation and coordination between public European broadcasters. This would bring the European level closer to the national one and foster a sense of European identity. Whilst noting the underrepresentation of young people in EU institutions or party systems as partly causing the problem, he added that the lack of young voices in mainstream media is also responsible. He warned that populist movements are capitalising on the fake news spreading on social media, and called for the EU to allocate more money to financing investigative journalism (with no strings attached) within all 28 member states. **Wiczorek** pointed to the most important measure as the proposal of policies by political parties and groups that bring democracy on a local level. He called for a greater voice to be given to people on a local level, as well as to the European Parliament. States, he said, cannot tackle global issues, but cities can.

Benifei answered that all good policies cut across divisions, adding that polarisation does not serve people. He underlined the importance that young people understand the EU project and pointed to education as an urgent measure to be used by public institutions to teach about the EU's basic history. No one will believe in the EU if they do not understand it. **Lironi** pointed to the restoration of trust in general as a crucial measure. Trust, she said, depends on three factors: competence,

benevolence and integrity. She challenged the EU's hold of these values, raising firstly the financial crisis of 2008, since which the use of austerity measures has been debated; secondly, the lack of use of instruments of direct democracy like the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI); and thirdly, events like Barroso's move to Goldman Sachs and the lack of remand over Oettinger's recent deplorable statements. She also highlighted the issues around CETA in proving the lack of citizens' trust in the EU.

Discussion

In response to a question on how to make the EU project appeal to the masses, **Benifei** underlined that all European countries need people and governance to find new compromises to bring us together. Big inequalities, he said, cannot be solved unless there is a big framework among member states. He called for solidarity mechanisms at the European level. **Delcker** added that it is crucial to get the word out that what is happening in Brussels is relevant. He stressed the need for decent reporting on the ground that relays how decisions in Brussels effect the rest of Europe. He warned that the public sphere is rapidly changing and that few media outlets are committed to accurate reporting.

On the contribution of the media to the blame game in member states, **Delcker** agreed and raised the example of Brexit, which sparked an incredible polarisation in the media. He added his fear that people who are not picked up enough by mainstream media fall to populism. Whilst a lot of newspapers are cutting costs on a local level, facts in debate are crucial and can prevent an erosion of democracy. **Lironi** remarked that the blame lies with politicians, who have been shifting blame to Brussels and blackmailing the EU for a long time. She added that traditional journalism is no longer working as it should due to expanding digitalisation. A big problem is that young people do not pay for journalism and access articles mainly through their social media feeds, meaning that they have less access to quality information and that they tend not to be informed on opinions different to their own. Journalism, she stressed, must adapt to what is happening at a digital level.

In answer to a question on whether education and employment can be centralised at EU level, **Wieczorek** said that this is already happening to some extent through the creation and merging of youth employment measures across member states. **Benifei** added that he sees this convergence as unfeasible for now due to macroeconomic, adjustment and political reasons. Moreover, he noted his belief that the common currency is not working, claiming that its reparation through federal instruments, such as common unemployment insurance, could be used as a leverage to in turn make Europe more federal. Education, he stressed, should also be a federal competence, where there is a common direction by which people learn about the democratic functioning of the EU.

3. How to turn social movements and activism of young people into political powers?

Leticia Diez, Member of FutureLab Europe, joined the debate, answering the question with three points: first, that online petitions can be a simple and powerful tool to engage young people in politics; second, that social movements only achieve what they want when they merge into politics and join a political party (for instance the gay rights movement in Spain during Zapatero's government); and third, she noted that some groups of society have more facilities to articulate what they want compared to others who are more vulnerable (for instance, illegal immigrants, the poor or disabled). We should therefore be mindful about inclusiveness when trying to answer this question. She questioned the extent to which we want a democracy that is more reliant on direct interventions but that can entail new forms of inequality. **Wieczorek** spoke from the perspective of climate action, explaining how difficult it is to achieve substantial outwards action. He noted that experiences show that, if you want to make change without getting involved in politics, you have to get dirty (for instance, protest through occupation or persistent action) and so loud that mainstreaming politics cannot ignore you. He raised the example of a village in Poland that blocked a fracking company everyday over a year.

Lironi stated that political parties should be more open to including young people in their electoral lists. In addition, she called for the ability to vote for candidates in the EU elections who are not linked to one's nationality. **Benifei** highlighted the need for better campaigning on the relationship of social movements with social politics. He explained that he entered politics through a broad political movement centred on globalisation, and that he represents the voice of young people in dealing with issues from a new perspective.

Discussion

In response to a question on how to bridge the gap between governments and civil society, **Wieczorek** raised the issue that people call for change yet with no answer on what type of change. **Diez** added that social movements do not find the right incentives with politicians. On how the EU has adapted its approach to youth in the digital native era, **Benifei** underlined the clash of power and interests at social movement and party level as integral to the extreme individualism existing today. Whilst mainstream politicians still have no real solution to this, he emphasised the importance to involve new big actors, such as social networks and internet giants. **Wieczorek** added that his organisation does not have the money to address this issue, adding that the biggest political parties spend a tremendous amount to directly influence the debate with fake facts and hired agencies. **Lironi** raised a recent study, stating that politicians do not understand which tools to use in addressing young people in the digital place. On the outsourcing of public services in the mobilisation of citizens to help with the refugee movement, **Wieczorek** agreed that states are depending on civil society to deal with this problem, which cannot be solved *ad hoc*.

4. How to reach out to the disengaged?

Thomas Baumgartner, Member of FutureLab Europe, joined the panel, referring to the success of Trump in reaching out to people who we would consider disengaged. He questioned whether we want to reach out to all people, or just to those who share like-minded political views. He stressed the need to bridge the ever widening gap between urban and rural areas, and other opposing narratives on an EU and global level. Whilst society is split 50/50, it is impossible to forecast anything. He pointed out to digital petitions as a good outreach method and highlighted the responsibility of everyone present in the room to reach out to those in our immediate environment that do not share our views. **Lironi** highlighted technology as a useful participation tool to spread democracy and make it more rapid and efficient, adding that education is also a long-term strategy to pursue. It is important, she said, that people grow up with a sense of political culture. In the short term, strategies such as consultations with young people can be used to help uncover the reasons for their disengagement.

Wieczorek raised how inconsistent expectations of citizens pose a big challenge to politicians. Whilst they want less tax, they want more social security, and treat politics like something that requires no effort. Youth engagement requires action from all stakeholders, for instance, politicians, the media and NGOs. **Benifei** pinpointed the main problem as the growing paranoia towards the way by which politics works. People outside of the room must be reached by showcasing positive examples of policies that work. This, he said, is the only way to break the circle of mistrust and engage young people.

Discussion

In response to a question on the role of education in changing people's perspectives, **Lironi** raised Erasmus as being the best example of this, whilst **Baumgartner** urged the audience to engage conversations on politics in their immediate circles. On short term methods of reaching out to the masses, **Dhéret** mentioned the need for support at the national level to provide strategies. A member of the audience voiced his concern over the EU's standing as an economic project as opposed to a political one, due to the inconsistency of politicians in delivering. Regarding the examples of best practices in trying to engage people, **Baumgartner** gave the example of a party in the last Austrian elections, which made considerable progress by making home visits and talking directly with citizens about politics. **Lironi** added that the uniting of NGOs working on the same issues has powerful results. On the need for the EU to be projected as a peace project instead of an economic one, and the error of the Brexit campaign regarding this, **Lironi** agreed and remarked that political willingness is lacking.

Dhéret concluded the session by thanking the speakers and the audience for a dense but comprehensive discussion which tackled different issues and aspects of the overarching question. She wrapped up by naming various practical examples for increasing youth's participation in politics, such as civic education, increased accountability of mainstream political parties, as well as the need for more accurate information in journalism and the media. There is a need, she stressed, for collective action. She raised the point that democracy should not be taken for granted and noted the value of FutureLab Europe in bringing young Europeans together, as well as its plans to expand its network beyond conventional profiles.