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Campaigning for Europe

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(4) Mobilising Generation Z 8 November, JDE51

Speakers: Sara Carrer (Senior advisor, ThinkYoung; Senior Director Europe & Africa, Burson Cohn & Wolfe (BCW)); Thomas da Luz Duque (Head of Digital, 20something); Lucia Laterza (Community manager, Manythink); Louis Durant (Road Trip Project participant)

Moderator: Maria Freitas (Policy advisor, Foundation for European Progressive Studies)

Youth engagement had already been on the EuroPCom programme in previous years, mostly focusing on the millennial generation. In this workshop, the target group was "Generation Z". The question was how to connect with this age group and what can be done to mobilise young people and create a sense of belonging to and support for the EU.

The session started with moderator **Maria Freitas**, who introduced the panel and explained the focus of this session: to get a better understanding of who Generation Z was, going beyond the stereotypes, and to discuss how the EU, policy-makers and influencers could bridge the perceived gap between generations.

A first overview was given by **Sara Carrer**, who stated that "Gen Z" included all those born between 1995 and the present day. This was a key demographic, as it actually represented one third of the world's population. She specified that Gen Z was very distinct from Generation Y and the "millennials" in terms of the challenges they faced in their youth. They grew up in a world of greater perceived danger due to the proliferation of communication technologies and social media, of which they were avid users; they were exposed to more news and images of war, famine and global suffering. Generation Z had grown up in a period of global instability, economic crisis and global recession. They had witnessed the struggles of their peers who had experienced the highest rates of unemployment since the 1930s. Conversely, Generation Z was also fortunate enough to have grown up in a more diverse, tolerant and open society than previous generations. There were also indications that Generation Z rejected more traditional social and cultural values such as gender stereotyping in favour of more gender-neutral mentalities. According to Ms Carrer, one of the most important things to recognise was that this generation lived in a "world of connections" via digital online social media such as YouTube or Facebook. As such, they were not aware of communication protocol from before the advent of the "swipe" function. Their own births may have been documented online.



Ms Carrer characterised Generation Z as being urban and highly educated. Over 50% would have a university degree but they may not be interested in pursuing a conventional education because they recognised the instability in the job market and a greater shift towards the gig economy. Therefore, they were more inclined to be entrepreneurial and involved in creating their own start-ups. Over 50% of Generation Z wished to set up their own company. Unlike other generations, however, they demystified failure and viewed any failed efforts as a positive experience and as lessons learned. This indicated a pragmatic mentality. They were described as being more actively productive with their time and spending less on leisure. This may be the result of their hyper-connectedness, as the way they communicated was even more fleeting than Generation Y, based on rapidly evolving abbreviations, emoticons and other cultural capital. Despite their apparent electoral apathy, there were indications that Generation Z had strong opinions and wished to make an impact in some way. 30% of Generation Z volunteered in some capacity. Similarly, more than 80% wished to do more with their lives than engage in leisure activity and wished to make an impact on society.

It was highlighted that, because of Generation Z's distinct characteristics, a new strategy was needed to engage with them effectively. Suggestions included: using their own IT tools, improving visual communication, engaging in more frequent communication, tapping into their entrepreneurial spirit and, most importantly, pursuing collaborative engagement which underlay an authentic, mutual respect for enthusiastic intergenerational learning. Generation Z had many lessons to offer as older generations and engagement should not be thought of as a one-way street. **Thomas da Luz Duque** described the difficulty of genuine communication with Generation Z in practice because they were on average 2.5 times quicker in online communication and their attention was more difficult to attract and retain as the pace was so quick.

Bridging the gap between the overview and the need for authentic engagement and pragmatism, **Lucia Laterza** highlighted the social media campaign of the Road Trip Project which brought a number of young Europeans together to travel the EU and see first-hand some of the EU supported projects. The campaign was based on the ideal of maintaining a focus on real people/non-actors to discover what the European Union was doing in the Member States and having frank and honest discussions with young people. Common questions they received such as "Why is the EU wasting money on this project?" were just as important as praise for the participants in seriously engaging an educated youth that knows when it is being patronised. This was how they would bring the next generation into a stakeholder discussion on European politics through greater proximity to the EU.

An internal perspective of the Road Trip Project was shared by **Louis Durant**, participant and member of Gen Z himself. He made the point that, despite living in Brussels all his life, he would never have come to the EU institutions had it not been for the unexpected experience of submitting a 60 second film to a vlog contest. Louis described seeing a number of different local projects all linked by their common output of cohesion policy and said this had been an eye opener that had encouraged him to get more involved.

The floor was opened up to questions. The first was about how to channel youth mobilisation towards more traditional modes of politics and how the institutions could encourage young people to vote. In response to this, **Sara Carrer** stated that our society was still stuck in the 1950s in our voting practices and that we should consider new ways of voting by asking for public opinion more frequently and in more direct democratic and participatory ways. An example of this was e-democracy. **Thomas da Luz Duque** stated that it was essential to adapt to new tools of communication to educate as printing leaflets is no longer the right way to reach out to young people. **Lucia Laterza** felt there was a huge gap between Generation Z and other generations and that

there was much miscommunication on many levels, Generation Z may live in a bubble where they feel European but they may have no interest in what happens in the EU. Priority must be given to speaking the same languages and increasing the proximity between generations to "balance the bubble". **Louis Durant** said of his own experience that he was first engaged directly with EU affairs at the local level by an Instagram vote and felt that while he personally intended to vote in the EU elections, he was more interested in grassroots activism.

A second question asked about what kind of platforms exist or should be available engaging with Generation Z. **Thomas da Luz Duque** said that platforms evolved all the time and how members of Generation Z spent their time should be examined. He shared an example of fifty young people coming to the *20-something* agency to manage their own project. This was the kind of education that did not lecture, patronise or disengage young people.

Another remark was made that the young generation generally seemed positive about the concept of "Europe" but they didn't question the existence of the European project and were not aware of the potential loss if it failed. **Lucia Laterza** agreed that many took the EU for granted, although Brexit had been a wake-up call for many. **Sara Carrer** added that she also did not believe that omnipositivity contributed to healthy engagement and that stark reality dictated people's minds.

An audience member asked how youth workers could transition topics of discussion towards political engagement and maintain the momentum of attention. **Thomas da Luz Duque** said that just because you failed did not mean you stopped trying. Generation Z had an attention span of around 20 minutes and as such presentation skills should match. This meant that tools such as PowerPoint and other slow media were not suitable for conveying information. **Sara Carrera** advised integrating political topics into existing activities and trying to avoid the word as it may be considered deflating, even though everything we did could be considered "politics".

Maria Freitas concluded the session and formulated the main takeaway of the session: **"Europe, listen to Generation Z and co-create with young people a Europe that seeks through emotions"**.