



EuroPCom session report

(Re)-connecting with young Europeans

Thursday, 7 November, 16h30 – 18h00

Speakers: **Magdalena Starostin**, Head of the Youth Outreach Unit, DG Communication, European Parliament; **Stefan Haenen**, Account Manager, Hill+Knowlton Strategies, Belgium; **Wietse van Ransbeeck**, Co-Founder and CEO of Citizen Lab, Belgium; **Frieder Seidel**, Teacher involved in a series of Citizens' debates in schools in Saxony, Germany

Moderator: **Beatriz Porres**, Head of Visits and Publications Unit, European Economic and Social Committee

After this year's EP elections in May 2019, the discussion was built on current topics to get the attention and interest of a target group of young Europeans and first-time voters. The workshop evolved around the question of how to engage with young voters on public policy issues in the future.

Beatriz Porres opened the workshop by welcoming everyone and calling (re)-connecting with European citizens a huge but extremely important responsibility. Furthermore, she presented some figures on the last EP elections: 40% of voters were under 40 years of age, which got governments to think about engagement with young Europeans even more. On top of that, Porres referred to the Fridays for Future movement as a positive trend towards political engagement among young people. On the other hand, some negative trends were presented. Brexit, which happened partly because a huge amount of young people in the UK did not vote at all, was the main example. The positive turn this had and the increasing awareness when it comes to the integration of young people in political decisions. Before giving the floor to the speakers, Porres raised a few important questions: Are we not using the right language to reach young people? What language should we use? Young people are not organising themselves in traditional and institutionalised ways, so what can be done to make their organisational structures more sustainable? How can the EU attract young people to come visit the institutions and what more could be done?

Magdalena Starostin emphasised the goal of putting engagement with young Europeans in a consistent framework. She highlighted the European Youth Event, the biggest public event of the EP, attracting 8500 young people to meet in Strasbourg every two years. The main focus is to discuss public policy issues and to foster engagement between the youth and decision-makers. She explained how this provides the opportunity for two-way communication: young peoples' ideas are collected on several policy areas, which will then be presented to MEPs at EP hearings.

Ms Starostin presented the event's key success factors:

- the EP steps back as an institution and lets young people speak instead, which is a real game-changer,
- institutions are less intimidating to young people, as they are provided with an arena,
- topics to be discussed are also chosen by the people invited to fully reflect their needs.

Ahead of the 2020 edition of the event, an online survey on speakers and topics will be conducted for two months. Half of the programme is organised by youth organisations, which are financially supported. The event will consist of panels, which are more interactive than conferences. Young people's ideas are collected, youth hearings are initiated, selected ideas are presented by the respective people and are then voted on. Through co-creation, the EP hopes to reach people who might not trust local politicians and who feel disconnected from EU politics.

Wietse Van Ransbeeck pointed out that a lack of transparency was, and still is, one of the main reasons why young people do not get involved in politics. To integrate them, the right language and tools are important. He does not feel that social media is a constructive tool to run consultations. Legitimacy and efficiency of public decisions can be improved through citizen participation. The workflow of civil servants needs to incorporate digital democracy platforms such as CitizensLab. The platform he co-created engages citizens on projects to participate in, manages citizen feedback, helps to understand the needs of citizens and bases decision-making on data insights. An example for the usage of such a platform was *Youth for Climate*. In Belgium, young people used the platform to reach out and communicate 1700 ideas, which were clustered into 15 priorities and presented to policy-makers. This shows that citizens need to set the agenda. Furthermore, the process of decision-making needs to be transparent, meaning the focus should be on closing the feedback loop and showing the democratic outcome of the process to the citizens. Institutions need to be prepared for the digital age, efficiency needs to be incorporated into the workflow for continuance.

Frieder Seidel shared that schools should be the best places to learn about political communication. The European Students' Forums are a best-practice example of this in-depth learning environment. Their purpose is to give students between the age of 16 and 19 the possibility to talk to high-ranking EU politicians, managers, NGOs and members of the European Committee of the Regions about issues they can relate to. The agenda usually starts with a panel session, followed by smaller group discussions on several issues. These student forums are examples of civic education, as talking about politics has to be learned and prepared. According to **Mr Seidel's** experience, these sessions are a true learning experience for both sides and not just a clash of opinions.

What he learned about young people and participation was that knowledge must be built upon when organising such events. Young people need help finding quality sources to do quality research, and this help comes from teachers, which might then lead to confidence on the part of the students. Lastly, most of the work is done by the students themselves, preparing for the topics, setting up the location, interacting with guests, summary and presentations, as is the case with EYE. This is why these guests are able to meet on an equal footing with the students. State schools represent a cross-section of the population. They receive fresh feedback on their work, making them the best place to teach young people about political communication. For **Mr Seidel**, it is apparent that people do not want more information

but that they prefer talking to experts directly. For successful communication, the EU has to be brought to young people and young people have to be brought to the EU.

Stefan Haenen used to be a facilitator in the past, also giving leadership training to young people. He pointed out how influencers were able to reach millions of young European citizens and how they could be used to talk to them. (A specific example of this is the *Invest in EU* campaign, which was launched in 16 EU Member States, partly built on influencer collaborations.) To do so, mainly young people with a very large group of followers were engaging with their audiences to get young people to be excited about societal topics. One of them was blogger Janna, whose audience consists of 15 to 30-year-olds. She talked about education and female entrepreneurship, also covering the issue of plastic pollution. **Mr Haenen** focused on the importance of listening to people and understanding how to build networks based on two-way communication. To allow the EU to work more closely with its citizens, he thus proposed more physical and digital workspaces. Furthermore, the EP should organise workshops on single issues, for example on video editing.

In the following **Q&A** with the audience, concerns were raised on how debates often do not reach European citizens living in remote areas, and who might not be fluent in English, for example. **Ms Starostin** agreed that the initiatives of the EU institutions often address a homogeneous group and called for initiatives to attract citizens who do not have the language abilities, come from areas which are less populated and might not have the financial means to attend conferences to ensure a diverse audience. Other remarks were on how European youth must not be seen as a single entity, as there are huge differences, such as educational background and place of origin.

Key takeaways of the workshop were:

- fresh approaches are needed, especially at schools throughout Europe to provide channels for young people to communicate with the institutions,
- the EU must contact people directly, especially those living in remote areas.

Young people want to be heard, they want to be debated with and thus taken seriously. In order to keep them involved and interested, they need to be included in the political discourse. This needs to be a bottom-up instead of top-down approach.