

SOFIE AMALIE STAGE

Young people's expectations from European politics

In the Brussels bubble, we tend to believe that every European citizen follows European politics, knows what and who the *Spitzenkandidaten* are, and is all on top of who actually has the right to initiatives. Unfortunately, this is far from the truth. Therefore, predictions ahead of the European elections must not only consider what we know of European politics, but, even more so, what is happening in the regions and states, as well as what individual citizens think about and expect of the EU.

How the pandemic, inflation and the energy crisis have affected citizens of the EU in the past mandate highly depend on political actions within member states. Thus, the baseline cost of living is not and was not equal before the Covid pandemic and the inflation crisis. However, despite these differences between nations, one specific demographic group all over Europe is currently being affected by the same challenges: the young generation.

The young generation currently growing up in Europe is the first generation that is growing up poorer than their parents. They have less buying power, the housing market is entirely impossible to enter as a new buyer and even rentals in a reasonable cost bracket are almost non-existent in big cities – and, as a reminder, the big cities are where most higher education institutions are. If they cannot live near those, then how are they ever expected to be able to get a good job to free them from being dependent on their parents' incomes?

This is the reality of almost every single young person in Europe, no matter their nationality or residence. At the same time, they have grown up constantly being reminded of crises. They were introduced to the climate crisis in primary school and saw their parents counting every penny during the financial crisis in 2008. During this past EU mandate alone, they lived through the Covid-19 pandemic, forcing them to be educated online and be isolated from family and friends, while worrying about the consequences on their own and their families' health. We are currently still witnessing war on European ground as Russia illegally invaded Ukraine, challenging democracy and sovereignty, while throwing us into yet another financial crisis with high inflation and an energy crisis all over Europe.

Please understand me correctly, this is not my bid in a competition between generations of who has had to endure the worst conditions. But to understand possible voter turnout

and to gain an insight into possible political priorities of the youth, the reality young people are living in must be emphasised.

So, let us begin with voter turnout. The young generation is active, it cares, and many are joining grassroots organisations in search of a better future.

In my experience, we can divide young people into three categories, when analysing their political behaviour:

- 1) Those who are politically active in a party, who already know what they want to vote, and do not need to be mobilised.
- 2) Those who are active in grassroots organisations, who either will certainly vote, but are very unsure what to vote, or those who will not vote, as they do not believe any party can represent their values or understand their struggles.
- 3) Those that do not follow politics at all and need to be mobilised to vote or might just vote what their parents tell them to.

Groups 2 and 3 have somehow led to a general misconception by the older generation that the reason for low voter turnout among the youth is due to arrogance or lack of interest. This is simply not true. The issue lies with the lack of ownership of policies, the lack of inclusion of young voices in political debates and policy processes, as well as the lack of exterior motivation and of the belief that their vote matters.

Taking into account the many crises young people have experienced in this past mandate, I believe we could see an increase in voter turnout among the 18(16)-30 year olds, if – and this is a big ‘if’ – the political parties manage and are willing to include young candidates on their list, in which young people can recognise themselves, and do not ‘youth wash’ their policies, but actually include young people in the process of developing their political manifestos ahead of the elections.

For young people, it is certain that political priorities can be divided into two groups. The first group focuses on basic needs related to the cost-of-living crisis; here it remains to be seen whether the political parties can promote policy proposals that will enhance young peoples’ ability to get housing, a job and an education without bankrupting themselves. I believe this first group will be the biggest one. The second group is smaller, as it includes young people in those parts of the EU where the social security system is already ensuring some basic necessities for young people. The core priority of this group will be the fight against climate change, and here young people will look at the extent to which political parties are serious and ambitious in this field. Young generations have been screaming to save the environment since the 1980s – today, they are fed up and done with waiting.

The young generation knows that many issues must be combatted in the political arena. It is our job in the progressive family to show them that a vote for us is a vote in favour of their future.