

# DIGITAL DEMOCRACY DAY 2017

## Rejuvenating Europe: Opportunities in the Digital World

17 October 2017 | Brussels



- REPORT -

## Agenda

9.00 – 9.30	Registration
9.30 – 9.45	Keynote Speech <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <b>Villu Varjas</b>, Estonian Presidency of the EU</li></ul>
9.45 – 11.00	Panel 1: Millennials Today – what are they thinking and are their voices being heard? Moderator: <b>Assya Kavrakova</b> , Executive Director, ECAS <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <b>Maria Freitas</b>, Policy Adviser, FEPS, Millennials Report</li><li>▪ <b>Isabelle Dochy</b>, Programme Coordinator, European Broadcasting Union</li><li>▪ <b>Roslyn Fuller</b>, Author and Academic, Solonian Democracy Institute</li></ul>
11.00 – 11.15	Coffee break
11.15 – 12.30	Panel 2: Initiatives for engaging youth in policy-making – exploring the digital potential Moderator: <b>Daniel Van Lerberghe</b> , Director, Innogage <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <b>Fraser Henderson</b>, TCI, DEEP-linking Youth</li><li>▪ <b>Chloé Berthelemy</b>, Policy Officer, Young European Federalists</li><li>▪ <b>Anthony Papadimitriu</b>, CaféBabel, Partnerships and communications officer, ASK</li><li>▪ <b>Ekaterina Petrikevich</b>, International Project Manager, D21</li><li>▪ <b>Daniela Vancic</b>, European Programme Manager, Democracy International</li></ul>
12.30 – 13.00	Concluding remarks by <b>Brando Benifei</b> , MEP – Awards to digital competition winners
13.00 – 14.00	Lunch and exhibition of projects <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <b>EUth</b> – “Tools and Tips for Mobile and Digital Youth Participation In and Across Europe”, Evaldas Rupkus, Project Manager for Marketing &amp; Deployment</li><li>▪ <b>Apptivism</b>, Simon Day and Alex Tupper, Co-Founders</li><li>▪ <b>ASK</b>, Matthieu Amare and Safouane Abdessalem, CaféBabel</li></ul>

On 17 October 2017, ECAS held its third annual Digital Democracy Day - *Rejuvenating Europe: Opportunities in the Digital World* – focusing on identifying the most common challenges to youth participation in European policy-making and proposing several concrete solutions to them by using digital tools.

The event represented the final conference of the Erasmus+ project [Deep-linking Youth](#), a partnership between ECAS and six other organisations, in order to explore and test out different ways of engaging young people in the EU's democratic life.

Over 110 participants took part in the conference and the event has been viewed over 6,700 times online.



### **Digital is a self-evident part of our lives**

**Villu Varjas**, Counsellor for Interinstitutional Relations at the Permanent Representation of Estonia to the EU, opened the conference by delivering a keynote speech on the main challenges and achievements experienced by Estonia in implementing online e-participation methods in order to give a greater voice to young people.

Mr Varjas began by discussing the recent Estonian reform that allowed 16 and 17 years old citizens, for the first time, to take part in the last national elections through online and offline tools. From this experience, however, it emerged that providing simple means of participation does not automatically mean that young people will use them. The election's outcome, indeed, showed that the voting rate among young people was lower than among registered older citizens. In light of these considerations, Mr Varjas affirmed that a multilevel process needs to be established to make the political process more attractive to young people.

Starting from the top, youth policies and youth inclusion should be part of the EU debate and young people should be involved in the definition of the next EU youth strategy. Mr Varjas highlighted the role played by social media platforms in helping policy-makers to address and listen to young people, especially those who are not part of youth organisations and have fewer opportunities to get their voices heard.

In addition to this, it is possible to promote more participatory behaviours among young people at local level. An interesting example, Mr Varjas suggested, is participatory budgeting, in which digital tools play a key role by ensuring both a platform for voting and a space for sharing ideas.

“Digital is a self-evident part of our lives”, said Mr Varjas, and digital tools have the potential for making not only our lives, but also the participation in the decision-making process, simpler and more efficient.

He concluded his speech by asserting that we should be more open to new ideas and trust digital solutions.

## Panel 1: Millennials Today – what are they thinking and are their voices being heard?

At the end of the keynote speech, **Assya Kavrakova**, ECAS' Executive Director, introduced the topic of the first panel and the speakers who were invited to share their knowledge and experience in the field of e-participation as well as identify the challenges that need to be addressed in order to promote the participation of young people at both local and European level.



**Maria Freitas**, Policy Adviser at FEPS, focused her speech on the findings of research conducted by FEPS on the engagement of Millennials in the political ecosystem. The research collected the views of 23,000 young people from all over the world and it emerged that, among younger generations, there is a lack of trust in, and disappointment towards, politicians who are not considered to be working for the benefit of the people they are serving and who are perceived as distant from young people.

Nevertheless, Ms Freitas affirmed that Millennials are an optimistic generation and they are ready to engage and voice their opinions on the main issues society is facing nowadays, such as quality jobs, education and healthcare. Ms Freitas concluded her intervention by declaring that one of the main challenges to address today is, therefore, to change the negative narrative leading to young people not wanting to engage. Young people, on the contrary, want to be addressed by politicians and to be empowered positively in the policy-making process.

**Isabelle Dochy**, Programme Coordinator at the European Broadcasting Union, presented the *Generation What?* project, an interactive program for TV, radio and online designed to engage with young people and find out what Millennials think. Ms Dochy explained that the project was based on a questionnaire of 149 questions that received around 1 million answers from young people in 35 different countries. From the analysis of the different answers gathered through the questionnaire it was possible to identify some European trends.

Young people seem to have limited trust in the education system, politics and the media. According to Ms Dochy, they also don't trust Europe and have a negative view of rising nationalism. Despite these negative trends, the questionnaire revealed that European youth expect better times in the future and want to take part in society.

**Roslyn Fuller**, author and academic from the Solonian Democracy Institute, started her speech by talking about what we currently know about young people. She pointed out that younger generations are experiencing a longer adolescence (going to university, carrying out unpaid internships, living with their parents, etc.) followed by a 'crunch' time of having children, starting a career and buying a house. Despite these issues, Ms Fuller stated that young people still vote in relatively high numbers and engage more when there is a candidate or party that addresses their concerns. Nevertheless, young people do not vote as much as older people do and there is a substantial gap in the participation rate between younger and older generations.

According to Ms Fuller, the way we do politics today is based mainly on the approach adopted during the pre-digital era and, if we want to foster participation in policy-making among young people, it is necessary to adopt more updated forms of engagement in line with the new digital era. Ms Fuller suggested some solutions that could be effective in promoting youth participation: addressing young people with a different political marketing strategy; lowering the voting age; simplifying voter registration procedures; and, paying for participation.

At the conclusion of the first Panel, Ms Kavrakova gave the floor to **Petko Georgiev**, President of ProInfo and partner in the DEEP-linking Youth project, who reflected on the role of digital tools in the frame of youth participation. According to Mr Georgiev, digital participation is based not only on the use of new technologies but is strictly connected to other offline components, such as the content, level of engagement and reasons behind participation.

Young people are, nowadays, invited to take part in political processes that are perceived as too far from their daily issues. In the opinion of Mr Georgiev, the political establishment should take into consideration changes in political representation in order to start a transformation process to become something closer and more comprehensible to young people. He concluded by stating that digital participation should be accompanied by an increasing level of media literacy among both adults and young people in order to better understand the digital environment and have the necessary tools for identifying fake news and analysing online content.

## **Panel 2: Initiatives for engaging youth in policy-making – exploring the digital potential**

**Daniel Van Lerberghe**, Director of Innogage and moderator of the second panel, opened the second round of discussion and introduced the speakers, who were called upon to explore the potential of digital tools in engaging more young people with decision-makers.



**Fraser Henderson**, Senior Associate at The Consultation Institute, presented the DEEP-linking Youth project and described the potential of the Digital Dashboard, an e-platform created in the framework of the project with the purpose of listening to young people's voices online.

In particular, he explained how the Digital Dashboard has been trained to filter online content related to the Erasmus+ Programme and show young people's views on youth mobility. According to Mr Henderson, the Dashboard represents a useful digital tool that can be used by policy-makers for listening to the opinions of young people who are not assertive or do not usually participate.

Mr Henderson concluded his speech by saying that the Digital Dashboard can be used, for instance, to: dig

for different perspectives on specific topics; refuse or confirm existing research; and, complement traditional consultation methods by allowing policy-makers to monitor the online debate.

**Chloé Berthelemy**, Policy Officer at Young European Federalists (JEF), shared the outcome of the JEF seminar on digital democracy and youth participation that was held in Brussels a few days before the Digital Democracy Day 2017 to identify the challenges in implementing digital democracy at different levels of decision-making (local, regional and European).

The seminar brought together around 20 people and it emerged that there is a lack of connection between citizens and their elected representatives. In order to resolve this issue, the current representative system should be complemented with forms of participatory democracy, which would allow citizens to take part in the different stages of the policy cycle (from the identification of the problem to the implementation of the decision).

According to Ms Berthelemy, digital tools can be used to increase the participation rate among young people, but it is necessary to go beyond the mere reproduction online of traditional forms of participation. In particular, if we want to foster citizen participation in the decision-making process through the use of new technologies, it is important that digital tools are designed in accordance with the principles of democracy and transparency.

In addition to this, policy-makers should better understand the potential of digital tools, especially in conferring greater legitimacy and efficacy on their decisions. On the basis of these considerations, policy-makers should invest more in digital tools and new technologies. Ms Berthelemy concluded her speech by stating that youth organisations such as JEF have a significant role to play in implementing digital democracy.

**Anthony Papadimitriu**, Communications and Partnership Officer at Cafébabel, began with a brief presentation of Cafébabel, the first European participatory magazine, which was created in 2011 by young people to better understand young people in Europe, and described the project #ASK, an online platform launched and implemented by Cafébabel in order to engage Millennials with decision-makers and foster the empowerment and active participation of young people in European democratic life.

Mr Papadimitriu explained how #ASK tries to create direct conversations between young people and policy-makers via twitter on hot topics, such as youth unemployment and environmental issues, in order to maximize the interest of young people in the project. Since new generations largely use social media in their daily lives, it is necessary to think about new ways of engaging young people that consider digital tools, which is what the #ASK project is trying to do.

To conclude, Mr Papadimitriu affirmed that the project represents a good starting point to better include Millennials in democratic life because, even if young people are disappointed with the current state politics, they remain optimistic and want to contribute to shape the future of Europe.

**Ekaterina Petrikevich**, International Project Manager at D21, presented the methodology developed by D21 to engage and empower young people by identifying the requirements for public participation today. While policy-makers should be better educated and informed about the benefits of public participation, there is a need to consistently build public participation skills within local communities and make sure that young people are equipped with the knowledge, tools and skills to participate in the decision-making process.

The specific requirements for public participation identified by D21 vary according to age group and can be grouped in three different age brackets: from 9 to 15 years old, kids should learn how to participate and acquire the necessary participation skills to engage in school level decision-making; from 16 to 18 years old, young people should acquire active citizenship skills and be introduced to civic life in order to engage in decision-making processes outside the school environment; finally, from 18 to 23 years old, young people should be able to exercise the skills previously learned within the university environment or civic life.

According to Ms. Petrikevich, adopting participatory budgeting processes in schools could help students to develop the necessary skills to meet the needs of public participation. This could enable students to participate in collective school decisions, develop their creativity and presentation skills; learn teamwork and independence, acquire basic financial literacy and critical thinking, and gain experience in active decision-making.

Participatory budgeting can, therefore, help students to actively contribute to their school's development by practicing their skills, learning how to manage money and lead a creative campaign. In addition to this, young people will be able to see the tangible results of their participation to the process, which may improve their trust in the democratic processes.

Finally, Ms Petrikevich stated that participatory budgeting is also beneficial for schools because it teaches democracy in practice, strengthens the confidence of pupils and parents in school management, providing student feedback, opinions, and ideas, and creates a democratic atmosphere.

**Daniela Vancic**, European Programme Manager at Democracy International, discussed the impact new technologies are having not only on our daily habits but also on the way we view democracy. In particular, she described the potential of the European Citizens Initiative (ECI), which represents the only digital and transnational tool for direct democracy that exists in the world. According to Ms Vancic, the ECI is a really powerful tool to drive democracy and strengthen citizen engagement at EU level, which is why Democracy International has worked along with ECAS in recent years to improve the tool. Among the recommendations presented to the Commission, Democracy International placed most value on lowering the age of participation to allow young people from 16 to 18 years old to sign ECIs.

Even if many teenagers do not seem to be interested in politics and do not feel connected with politicians, Ms Vancic said, lowering the ECI participation age may help young people to become more responsible voters in the future. Young people, indeed, tend to be more engaged when they can express their opinions about specific issues. Since the ECI is all about the issues that we would like to change transnationally at EU level, Ms Vancic concluded by saying that the ECI can be used as tool to improve youth participation at EU level.

**Brando Benifei**, MEP, concluded the conference by addressing the possible solutions to make young people more aware and better prepared to take part in EU decision-making.



According to Mr Benifei, many young people do not have the necessary instruments to understand how to interact with EU institutions and defend their interests in a fruitful way because the formal European education system does not educate them to be more active, conscious and capable citizens.

A strong non-formal education system should, therefore, complement the formal one through the use of digital tools. According to Mr Benifei, youth organisations can work to create participatory platforms and integrate them with traditional communication tools in order to allow young people to actively practice democracy.

“If we want digital democracy functioning we should support democracy in general”, said Mr Benifei. He concluded by stating that we should take advantage of the digital transformation in order to strengthen both democratic participation and citizenship. However, we should pursue media literacy and civic education in order to help young people to become digital democratic citizens.

Following his speech, Mr Benifei presented and awarded the six winners of the Digital Competition, who were invited to the conference to showcase their digital content on youth mobility in Europe.



During the lunch break, there was a mini exposition of three youth projects (EUth, Apptivism and ASK) to allow the participants to find out more about digital platforms.

### **“If we want to engage young people, we have to turn the coin”**

During the event, ECAS interviewed a number of participants, who gave their views on youth participation and digital tools. Here is a selection of what they had to say:

*“If we want to engage young people, we have to “turn the coin”. The way of doing politics is old-fashioned, and is based on the assumption that young people will engage how people have always engaged.”*

*“It is positive to see the will to engage people politically. If people think it is an important election, they will vote.”*

*“There’s been a lot of emphasis on how education is important, but we also think it’s a combination of education and having the right tools. Having better tools and better education is a way to increase participation with citizens.”*

*“There are lots of ideas and lots of tools. The only thing we have to do is work together and combine them because there’s no point in having the tool alone and reinventing the wheel again and again...The tools can work at the local and the European level. They just need to be adapted according to the needs.”*

*“Civic education is a key factor in attracting young people to political maturity.”*

*"The important thing is to start from the local level where young people can see the potential for change with their own eyes. Even for people who have been voting for a long time, it is very hard to understand the potential for change that they are creating with voting on parliamentary elections at the national level or even harder at the European level, so I think it's really important to start at the local level to give them chances to, in a way, shape their own community and then understand the importance of political participation."*

*"[Participatory democracy] is inevitable. Nowadays, things happen very, very quickly. You might be elected and you might have to deal with events that haven't even been foreseen at the time of your election. So, I do think the idea that we need to have an interface and a way to communicate between constituents and their representatives is really necessary to preserve even the idea of democracy and ensure that people are getting the policies they want."*

*"There will always be young people, and citizens in general, who don't want to participate, but we need to find ways to take their voices into consideration."*

*"At the European level it is quite difficult. Many e-participation initiatives have been successful at local and regional level. You need to start at local level as you need to find topics that interest people and that really impact their lives."*

*"I really think young people are capable and are willing to appeal to the responsibilities of policy-makers and decision-makers but it's rather more the system that doesn't allow them to engage because they are very active on social media not only within their personal interests but also with what is going on in the world."*