But there is a country for old men

Some elderly people struggle to live a dignified life in the EU, but overall young people are worse off

In the famous 2007 neo-Western crime thriller directed by the Coen brothers, the not-so-young sheriff, magnificently played by Tommy Lee Jones, is warned by his cousin: 'This country's hard on people. You can't stop what's coming. It ain't all waiting on you.' The Coens' film is *No Country for Old Men*, so why have I paraphrased this title to write about the situation of young people in Europe's democracies? After all, contemporary Europe does not resemble the wild desert of West Texas, where the Coens' movie takes place. Yes, some elderly people struggle to make their lives dignified in Europe, but I will argue that young people are worse off than old ones. The reason points to democracy's major shortcoming or, should I say, short-sightedness.

Democracy is hostage to the present-day voters, who are seldom young in today's Europe. During the recent European elections, the shares of first-time voters (persons who have reached voting age since the last European elections in 2019) were well below 10 per cent. No wonder they complain that their vote does not imply a voice in public affairs. There are simply too few young voters to impress any government. The generations younger than those allowed to vote and those who are not yet born are treated even worse by democracy, even though their number is open-ended. Lowering the voting age will only benefit a tiny fraction of future generations, so we've got a problem.

Broken promises

To be fair, politicians express plenty of concern about future generations. How many photos featuring our leaders with babies and children have you seen during successive electoral campaigns? How many environmental pledges have been made to make the lives of future generations bearable on this earth? How often have we heard about the importance of education in generating sustainable prosperity? I am not even talking about promises to keep public finances under control, so that future generations are not faced with the bill left by the last.

Unfortunately, most of these promises and pledges have been broken repeatedly, even by seemingly responsible democratic leaders. This is because politicians cannot ignore the electoral arithmetic. When faced with difficult choices, those who have votes prevail. This is how democracy works; it gives the majority of the day what they want — and those are likely not-so-young people. Whether you call this rational choice, selfishness or short-sightedness does not matter. What counts are the practical outcomes of policies hurting the youth. So much about the famous democratic saying 'no taxation without representation'. The future generations are continuously 'taxed' with no representation or voice. No wonder that in a relatively prosperous country such as Germany, just 21 per cent of Generation Z and millennials said they consistently support democracy compared to 66 per cent of those aged 70 and up. In France, young people's support for democracy was even lower at 14 per cent. The global standing of democracy is also worrisome. The 2022 Bertelsmann Foundation Index established that, for the first time in many years, we now have more autocracies in the world than democracies.

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We tend to blame populists for this sorry state of affairs, but we should also consider the impact of other factors. The 'flat' digitalised world is running at an ever-higher pace with enormous implications for democracy and young people. Climate change has accelerated tremendously, making the younger generation vulnerable in ways their parents have not experienced. The speed of economic transactions has affected chiefly young people who virtually 'sleep in their office' (next to a smartphone) and 24/7. Or think about the gig economy in which pensions and workers' rights are progressively diluted. Democracy's temporal myopia could be tolerated in the pre-digital era, but now it is profoundly hitting the young and future generations in various shapes and forms.

Worsening prospects

Democracy's response to this epochal acceleration is disappointing by any measure. The European Green Deal is now in tatters, as is the global process resulting from the 2016 Paris Agreement on Climate Change. 'There is already almost nothing left of the green deal', Julia Christian of the forest conservation group Fern told *the Guardian*. Have those who dismantled the Green Deal on financial or ideological grounds explained

to the youngsters how they would prosper when hit by the projected 2.7 degrees of warming — nearly double the Paris Agreement goal of holding climate change to 1.5 degrees? The last COP28 agreement to cut global fossil fuel production was described as 'grossly insufficient' and 'incoherent'.

Are governments surprised that young people cannot reconcile themselves with such disappointing results and rebel? The governments' response is not a dialogue with but repression of environmental protests. For instance, the Metropolitan Police in the UK, responding to a Freedom of Information request, revealed that in 2021-2022 members of the following climate change and education groups have been arrested: Extinction Rebellion, Ocean Rebellion, Coal Action Network, Right to Roam, Earth First, Youth Strike 4 Climate, Rising Tide, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), Burning Pink, Tree Defenders, Fossil Free, Just Stop Oil, Insulate Britain, HS2 Rebellion (or anti-HS2 protestors).

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Equally telling are cuts to European budgets on science and higher education. How will future generations cope with pandemics, floods or cyberwarfare without adequate education? How will they face the international competition in high-tech and modern armaments? Do our leaders believe that vaccines grow on trees? Do they think that courts can do their job without lawyers and that microchips will grow like mushrooms without semiconductor engineers? If not, why did the European Council representing 27 EU member states propose to slash €1.52 billion from flagship projects, including the Horizon Europe research and innovation programme and the Erasmus+ student mobility initiative?

In its budget proposal, Poland's new (pro-European) government envisages the lowest funds for science and higher education this century. The new Dutch (Eurosceptic) government proposed cutting the research and science budget by €1.1 billion and abolishing the National Growth Fund, which finances research and development. Higher education funding will be cut by €215 million annually in the Netherlands. It looks like pro- and anti-European politicians have something in common when it comes to the interests of younger generations.

Instead of fulfilling our youngsters' basic expectations, politicians create

phantom institutions to mimic pro-youth policies. Finland created a special body with a mandate to oversee the long-term applications of adopted policies and enhance sustainable thinking among policy-makers. Hungary has had, for some years, an Ombudsman for Future Generations. There will be a new EU Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport. There is no need to dismiss the potential virtues of these initiatives, but institutional engineering can hardly break the iron rules of democracy.

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If governments propose raising taxes to reduce the public debt, voters will get rid of them. Politicians trying to ban diesel fuels fear lorry, taxi or tractor drivers and not children who are not yet born. Investments in long-term projects to improve public housing or education imply cuts in other sectors benefiting the present-day electorates, such as wages or pensions. The alternative is ever-greater debt, and so we go around in circles. Can you imagine that the new EU Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport can change the rules of this game? I bet he will be more successful in promoting sports events than in enhancing the cause of intergenerational justice.

Therefore, I expect conflicts between younger and older generations to intensify in the coming years, and they will manifest themselves not in parliaments but on Europe's streets. This does not need to be bad news because real political change requires a high degree of public mobilisation. The student protests of 1968 did not achieve their revolutionary objectives, but they certainly gave a shock to the system. It is difficult to imagine that many of the reforms introduced in the 1970s (from family law to education) would have been pushed forward had young people not taken to the streets. However, if protests are destructive with little positive agenda for change, the result may be chaos with many casualties, democracy being one of them. In the case of a democratic vacuum, the title of the Coen brothers' famous film may indeed apply, and so I urge my not-so-young generation to stop being selfish.



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