

YOUTH IN EUROPE
OFFENBURG
TALKS “ ”



#1

SOLIDARITY AND
YOUNG PEOPLE
TODAY

REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What does solidarity mean to young people in today's modern, industrialised and globalised world? Do young people still need and want solidarity, and if so, with and by whom (and with whom not) and how can solidarity be practised today? Young people are living in complex economic and social conditions, and facing a growing diversity in terms of cultural, ethnic and social structures, as well as tensions between individualism and self-determination on one hand, and solidarity, based on a group identity, and participation for others or for a cause, on the other. It is of crucial importance for the future of democracy, the future of labour and social cohesion and, in general, the future of Europe, that the social and political challenges we are facing today are met by interventions based on the principle of solidarity. Citizens and civil society organisations, including trade unions, have a key role to play in this respect and youth work must also take responsibility and action to foster solidarity among young people and their organisations. Areas of intervention include participation, (non-formal) learning, cooperation with other structures, political engagement and internationalism, which need concrete projects and initiatives.

*SOLIDARITY IS
A WEAPON
– Graffiti in
Hamburg,
Hafenstrasse*



Photo: Hanjo Schild



INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In the first edition of the series “Youth in Europe Talks”, which took place 27-28 August 2018 in Salmen¹ Offenburg, 25 experts discussed the theme “Solidarity and Young People Today”. The aim of this “Youth in Europe Talk” was to explore what solidarity means to young people in today’s modern, industrialised and globalised world. The “Youth in Europe Talk” looked at the changing meanings of and conditions for solidarity, and addressed questions, such as if young people still need and want solidarity, and if so, with and by whom (and with whom not) and how solidarity can be practised today, and if we need a new understanding and potentially other forms of solidarity. Experts offered participants some basic and general reflections on the topic for inspiration and specific inputs on various aspects of solidarity were given as food for discussion². Participants discussed three topics: 1. Democracy and political participation, 2. Labour and new economy, 3. European values. The inputs as well as key points of discussions are summarised in this paper³. Some other issues relevant to the topic, such as poverty and equal opportunities, or the situation of minorities and refugees, have not been discussed in depth this time; these might be subject to further reflection in upcoming issues of the “Youth in Europe Talks”.

WHAT IS SOLIDARITY AND WHAT IS THE SITUATION OF (YOUNG) PEOPLE TODAY?

Solidarity is practised within small entities, such as families, youth groups, sub-cultures and in various communities, but it particularly relates to social classes (solidarity among workers) and larger social groups e.g. women. Solidarity is also practised in and between regions and states, or at transnational level e.g. in the European Union. There is even a “compulsory” or “structural” solidarity that protects and insures citizens against all kinds of risks and promises equal opportunities through a broad social security system. Throughout history, solidarity has been a driving force in a variety of social and political movements, e.g. in civic, ecological, anti-nuclear, peace or regional movements. In the past, solidarity meant action and struggle, real communication and proximity; recently digitalisation has led to new forms of expression.

Today, the ideal of a solidary society seems more than ever to have evaporated in the mists of world-wide (neo-)liberalism. People are living in rather complex conditions,

¹ The venue SALMEN represents two parts of German history: on one hand, the civil revolution of 1847/8 with demands of citizens for freedom, equality and human brother- and sisterhood, and on the other, the extermination of these values in times of National Socialism when a local synagogue was destructed there during the pogroms in November 1938.

² The inputs were given by Guy Redig, Free University of Brussels, Peter Matjašič, Open Society Foundation, Viktória Nagy, Youth Committee at European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and Ozgehan Senyuva, Middle East Technical University, Ankara. Howard Williamson, University of Cardiff, Wales summarised the discussions as the general rapporteur, and Darko Markovic acted as the facilitator of the “YOUTH IN EUROPE TALKS”.

³ This paper is largely based on these inputs, the report and contributions of participants and was drafted by Claudius Siebel, JUGEND für Europe and Hanjo Schild, senior expert on youth issues with support of representatives of the organising National Agencies of Erasmus+ Youth in Action, JINT Belgium Flanders, Archimedes Foundation Estonia, EDUFI Finland, JUGEND für Europa Germany and MOVIT Slovenia.



both economically and socially, and experiencing growing diversity in terms of cultural, ethnic and social structures as well as tensions between individualism and self-determination, on one hand, and solidarity, based on a group identity, and participation for others or for a cause, on the other. The relationship between social protection and individual responsibility is changing, infrastructures of institutionalised solidarity are at risk of being diluted. And, in view of a manifest disrespect for the principle of European solidarity by individual countries, we need to ask what the future of the European project and the place of young people in it is?

DEMOCRACY, POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND SOLIDARITY

Citizens of the European Union are feeling increasingly insecure about their future, reeling from socio-economic, cultural, generational and technological changes, and anxious about the apparent incapacity of European and national governments to solve problems. This makes them doubt the ability of the democratic system in general to meet their needs and serve their interests. This has resulted, among other things, to the rise of authoritarian populist parties, more and more toxic debates about ‘otherness’ and disengagement from democratic processes. Too many Europeans do not believe that the rules are just or fair and they do not think solutions being offered are going to be effective. Consequently, traditional political participation of European citizens has been steadily declining and new forms of participation in the digital realm have often been misused.

Too often, we try to measure political participation in the more traditional ways of voter turnout and membership in political parties. We should avoid the simplistic axis of people vs politicians and focus on how we can create participatory processes in which citizens can engage in ways that fit the purpose. Youth workers should harness their methodological expertise and engage in democratic experiments as well as work on ensuring proper diversity among their own practitioners and enable equal opportunities for everyone to take part.

In today’s reality, when spaces for civil society are closing and shrinking, and NGOs are framed as villains in (too) many countries across the world, including in the EU, it is important to focus on solidarity among and between different and diverse civil society actors. The fundamental rights and freedoms of open and vibrant democratic societies are under severe threat in today’s Europe, driven by fear and exploited by xenophobic populists. We should do more to bring together different sectors at local, regional, national, and European levels.

EUROPEAN VALUES AND SOLIDARITY

In the current political, social and cultural climate in Europe, the fundamental values outlined in article no. 2 of the Lisbon Treaty are under threat of erosion. This erosion is most evident in the issue of refugees in which we are witnessing a moral panic within Western and Central European societies. Attitudes and politics are motivated in large part by fear. This “liquid” fear is endemic in Western societies, where individuals feel they live in a



world increasingly marked with insecurity and vulnerability because of the uncertainties of the neo-liberal world. Thus, it is increasingly difficult to acquire facts to make informed decisions, which is fundamental for a functioning democracy. In the age of post-truth, a perception of danger to trigger fear is easily created. Rational analysis and fact-checking are secondary, fear rides on emotions.

Increasing radical right-wing populism builds on the same pattern and relates it even to the term solidarity. Nativism, authoritarianism with special emphasis on law and order, and populism as defending the rights of decent, ordinary citizens against a corrupt elite are the key characteristics of right-wing populism. These arguments are leading to increased polarisation and political distance between individuals as well as forcing some segments of the society into a spiral of silence.

How do young people, as an integral part of the society going through these phases, deal with this situation? Are they surrendering to the climate of fear or do they represent a beacon of hope, with their levels of Europeanness and with their post-materialist values? And how can youth work in general be used to address the everyday realities of young people and to promote and strengthen solidarity between young people at local, regional, national, European and international levels to stand against the rise and spreading of the climate of fear?

LABOUR, NEW ECONOMY AND SOLIDARITY

The situation of young adults in the labour market in the European Union remains difficult. Despite a drop in youth unemployment in Europe in recent years, the average unemployment level is still 16.1%, nearly 2.5 times higher than that of people aged 25 years or above. The employment rate among young people has also grown less than that of older adults in recent years, and many young people don't find work that adequately matches their qualifications, is socially regulated and sufficiently paid. And the number of young people working on temporary contracts is increasing in the EU as the number of permanent jobs keeps falling. In some countries, unpaid internships for young people are a well-known practice. Any job is not necessarily better than no job, if employees are not granted labour and social rights.

As opportunities for digitalisation increase and a great number of traditional work places disappear, we need to engage in discussions about just alternatives, redistribution of wealth, basic income, minimum wage, accessibility of social rights and their consequences to social and working standards and associated regulations. Legal guarantees for data protection, privacy and work-life balance must be developed for digitalised work, and it requires new skills, such as creativity, ICT skills, problem-solving, open minds and flexibility.

Trade unions play a key role in this regard. They must be open to new groups like freelancers, the self-employed, apprentices, interns, platform and crowd workers, and find new strategies for organising these groups by building expertise on their needs, rights and challenges. Trade unions must have an active dialogue with stakeholders and advocate more fair, equal, just and sustainable societies.



ANSWERS TO CURRENT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES...

From the perspective of young people, the system of representative democracy and traditional parties needs a (“radical”) change in terms of values, processes and issues. This points towards direct democracy, solidarity, civil society initiatives and new, unconventional forms of political participation which are bottom-up, self-organised, value-based, to complement representative democracy. The gap between trade unions as one of the oldest participation structures and young people must also be overcome, not exclusively for the benefit of trade union members, but also with and for other groups in need, including young people with difficulties. We must make our disagreement with the populist movements clearer, because civil society also provides a space for (far) right-wing organisations to grow and misuse ideas of direct democracy and alternative political options for xenophobia and undemocratic strategies.

To answer to current social and political challenges the following interventions are necessary:

- (Re-)Activation of the welfare state – socially, culturally, politically, ethically – by a democracy that includes elements of direct to representative democracy and meets citizens’ expectations.
- Citizens must uncover violations of democratic rules and norms and take to the streets to show that our societies are indivisible and that populists don’t speak in the name of all people.
- The systems of “cold” or “structural” solidarity (social security) must be supplemented (not replaced!) by “warm” initiatives, mainly in the field of volunteer work and philanthropy.
- Trade Unions must be allies in civil society and democratic life and promote values of solidarity, including new forms of economy such as social enterprises, cooperatives etc.
- Civil Society Organisations and citizens’ initiatives deserve active support and fair dialogue with authorities, politicians and civil servants.

...AND THE ROLE OF YOUTH AND YOUTH WORK

Youth work offers excellent methodologies and approaches to create safe spaces for young people from diverse backgrounds to come together to discuss issues that concern them. These spaces can be created with full participation of the target audience, and the role of youth work practitioners is to help facilitate and remind participants of the mutually agreed processes and code of conduct. These are the kinds of laboratories of democratic practice that we should expand on and trial on larger scale. Exploration and research of links between methods of youth work of engaging young people and tools used in participatory processes could provide new models of democratic practice.



Youth work can and must lead the way and explore new political, pedagogical and strategic concepts. To this end, it must develop a clear set of values and a vision for children and young people, as a separate ideological concept, which is much more than a mere methodology or a strand of youth work.

Crucial elements for this are:

- Youth work should make its underlying values, identity and goals more visible. These include human and universal rights, democracy, solidarity, participation as well as concrete support, advocacy and mentoring;
- Youth work is political: it should encompass and strengthen political participation, debates, deliberation and political competences, while at the same time taking a stronger and a more explicit role in this respect;
- Youth work must apply an emancipatory vision: to approach young people as fully-fledged co-owners of youth work and full members of society, while guiding them towards greater autonomy and to be actors in their own future;
- Youth work must be inclusive: it has to reach out to all young people coming from diverse backgrounds, with diverse interests and social statuses; it has to pay special attention to processes of exclusion, deprivation, inequality within and outside the youth work environment;
- Youth work must create, offer and defend its pedagogical environments as spaces in which there is time and place for and understanding of contradiction, doubts and discussion and in which young people can experience “warm solidarity” in a playful, creative and optimistic atmosphere;
- Youth work must liaise with other structures, such as human rights movements and civil society initiatives against populism and nationalism and join forces to protect the civic space and push back against authoritarian trends.

To achieve all or at least some of the above, we first need to investigate and reflect on how active, diverse, respectful, and reflective our own organisations and practices are and start with changing ourselves and our own worlds, and through that contribute to a systemic shift.

This paper was drafted by five National Agencies of the EU Programme ERASMUS+ Youth in Action organising the series YOUTH IN EUROPE TALKS, namely