

## **DISCUSSION PAPER**

# **THE ROLE OF YOUTH WORK IN FOSTERING EUROPEAN COHESION**

### Authors

Elke Führer, Hanjo Schild and Manfred von Hebel

Supported by Marta Medlinska and Janez Skulj

This discussion paper has been drafted in preparation of the European conference **Regaining Europe - the role of youth work in supporting European cohesion** (12-15 March 2019, Leipzig / Germany).

It assesses the critical situation of Europe in current days in terms of eroding solidarity, growing nationalism and scandalous social divide. It stresses the important role of active citizens as well as civil society to stand up for their rights and to fight against social scourges and political shortcomings. Further it asks about the role of the youth sector in contributing to re-establish a social, inclusive and democratic Europe and proposes four key areas for action at various levels, from local to European. As a conclusion the paper suggests to rewrite Europe's (hi)story and a new emerging narrative. After the discussions of the Leipzig conference it is expected to revise this discussion paper becoming a Manifesto on youth work and Europe.

## INTRODUCTION

*A spectre is haunting Europe* - a spectre of eroding solidarity in society and between European countries, of growing nationalism, xenophobia and social divide and of enhanced individualism and egoism. Democracy, human rights and rule of law are no longer standards respected by all governments and by all citizens. Poverty and social exclusion, poor health, care and education systems, precarious work and unemployment, housing problems and homelessness, racism and discrimination, disrespect of human dignity are experienced by millions of people. Minorities as well as many children and young people are particularly vulnerable and experience uncertain prospects. Even if young Europeans' lives in the EU are improving in recent years many challenges persist and some groups of young Europeans suffer particularly from inequalities<sup>1</sup>.

Due to the neoliberal and purely market-oriented policy in the last decade in which economy and competitiveness dominated the political agenda, open discourses based on democratic and social values and the idea of solidarity and indivisibility of our societies are being forced to the background. Populists, nationalists, racist and authoritarian leaders misuse the legitimate fear of many citizens and want to turn back the wheel of history. They preach a policy of disparity between winners and losers, the right and the wrong, owners and non-owners, included and excluded.

In view of this complex situation of social imbalance we need to put more effort into creating positive perspectives for all people across Europe, including the young and into a determined revival of (European) values such as democracy, solidarity, tolerance, diversity, social justice and peace.

And indeed, many citizens stand up for their rights and fight against social scourges and political shortcomings. Already today, particularly young people are active and resist discrimination and exclusion. They stand for an open, cohesive, democratic and fair society and for a Europe of human rights and social justice, for the right of asylum and protection, for a free and diverse society. They stand up to say no to populism and disparity.

Where does youth work and youth policy stand in this regard? Which role can and should the youth sector play in fostering the European idea, the European values and social cohesion? As a matter of fact, it is largely acknowledged that youth work fosters active citizenship, civic engagement, solidarity and social action. It promotes values such as human rights and democracy, intercultural dialogue, social inclusion, gender equality and the rights of minorities. Thus, youth work can substantially contribute to developing inclusive, democratic and peaceful societies and to "making a world of difference", as stated in the second European Youth Work Convention.

Consequently, the youth sector - young people, youth work and youth policy - including Youth NGOs, youth welfare organisations and youth agencies as well as individuals must take greater responsibility and concerted action in shaping the future of all children and young people and in the effort of safeguarding, in some cases regaining democratic societies and Europe as a whole. Of course, the youth field cannot change the world on its own. But the youth field can do better in contributing to (re-) establish Europe. Europe is not lost, it lives and needs renewal.

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<sup>1</sup> see Commission Staff Working Document on the Situation of young people in the European Union:  
↳ [https://ec.europa.eu/youth/news/eu-youth-strategy-adopted\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/youth/news/eu-youth-strategy-adopted_en)

## **FOUR KEY AREAS FOR ACTION**

So, what needs to be done in youth work, in youth welfare and in (youth) policy and in related areas such as civic education? How can we assure that young people experience Europe as a place to live, develop, grow and understand that an open and solidly united European society can only be impartible and must be based on solidarity? How could youth policy, youth work, youth welfare and civic education providers contribute to a European and democratic renewal?

It would be too simple to only refer to European leaders and policy makers at all levels, claiming a better policy, which would satisfy the needs, demands and concerns of citizens, including the young. Looking from the perspective of the youth sector it is necessary to write an own agenda and to bring it forward as a contribution for the renewal of Europe.

Four strategic key areas seem to be crucial in developing a coherent and sustainable strategy for a democratic, inclusive and social Europe!

### ***1. Democratic Europe***

Europe cannot function without (young) people's active European citizenship and engagement. The development of a Europe of citizens and a European civil society based on human rights is crucial in fostering a democratic Europe. We need opportunities for participation from the local to the European level as well as beyond national borders. Civil society must be given a systematic and structured role in shaping European policies and promoting Human Rights. A European renewal project calls also for more and better learning, more information and knowledge about and a better understanding of Europe in formal as well as in non-formal education and thus a stronger emphasis on European Citizenship Education aiming at an informed and critical European identity and awareness.

Therefore,

- The child and youth welfare community as well as civic education organisations must play a more pro-active role in our societies, being far more aware of Europe than it is today.
- Participatory principles in all spheres of young people's lives are crucial to establish a democratic everyday culture in society and participation in youth work activities paves the ground in this regard.
- We need to create more and better European projects, European cooperation in the private as well as the public sector at all levels, more activities for young people and more Europe in institutions and structures.
- A stronger Europe needs more European learning and education about Europe; an action plan for European Citizenship & Human Rights Education in formal and non-formal education is crucial.

### ***2. Social and Inclusive Europe***

The consequences of the economic crisis, by which the younger generation was hardest hit, are still apparent today. They are a daily reminder of how vital it is to strengthen a social and inclusive Europe. And they illustrate how very necessary it is to take responsibility for providing a favourable environment in all policy areas which concern young people in order to grow up happy and successful. It's a scandal that millions of young people are still and continuously long-term un- and underemployed, suffering from precarious working conditions or obliged to do traineeships without remuneration and social protection. And it's unacceptable that hundreds of thousands young

migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and other minorities don't have the same rights as all young people in Europe to live a decent life in dignity.

Therefore,

- European institutions as well as Member States need to provide a comprehensive social and inclusive policy for all young people and in all relevant policy areas, such as labour, health, education, housing, justice and youth.
- Youth policy makers are called upon to consistently implement the priorities and actions as adopted in the European Youth Strategy, and to shape an extended and relevant youth policy cooperation for the future.
- Youth policy as a sectoral as well as a cross-sectoral policy field needs to provide space for participation and to promote personal and social development, also by intervening in other policy areas whenever and wherever needed.
- Policy makers, supported by youth and social workers, must make sure that all young people have access to appropriate quality education and training schemes and sustainable jobs.
- Youth workers and youth NGOs need to create inclusively designed youth work structures for all young people, including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, in order to support them in becoming a part of Europe.
- Youth work practice as well as youth policy are called upon to make use of the “Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy – in the field of youth”, launched by the European Commission in 2014<sup>2</sup> and fill it with life via more concrete national inclusion and diversity strategies, concrete inclusion and diversity projects and accompanying policy measures.

### **3. European Programmes**

Erasmus+ Youth in Action and the European Solidarity Corps are *the* programmes for promoting European awareness and engagement, Human Rights and active European citizenship for young people, European youth work and youth policy cooperation across Europe. Also, the Council of Europe's European Youth Foundation encourages cooperation between young people, experts, organisations and structures. In all this, the European values loom large: diversity and pluralism, solidarity, an open Europe and active European citizenship, as well as the fight against racism and xenophobia. Young people's personal experience of Europe, like participation in a European youth project or volunteering, lead to committing to Europe in the long-term. The former European Voluntary Service within the youth strand of Erasmus+, now transferred and enlarged in the new European Solidarity Corps, and the ESC itself, are obvious outward signs of European commitment. Despite a recent substantial increase, the opportunities provided are far from addressing all young people and recognition and valuing of these activities lag behind their relevance. Therefore, and in view of the current political situation, still more is to be done.

Therefore,

- The use and application of programmes need to be assessed and monitored in terms of realisation of priorities and participation of target groups.
- National Agencies of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps must play a key role in this process and push for a better implementation.
- Future enlarged programmes need to take enhanced and special responsibility for promoting young people's active European citizenship and European values around democracy and human rights.

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<sup>2</sup> ↘ [https://ec.europa.eu/youth/news/20150130-youth-inclusion-diversity-strategy\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/youth/news/20150130-youth-inclusion-diversity-strategy_en);  
Strategy and materials available at ↘ [www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/inclusionstrategy](http://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/inclusionstrategy)

- A European renewal means to give *all* young people access to learning opportunities through cross-border mobility and volunteering – making it a “right to mobility”.
- Concrete action plans and adoption of benchmarks should make sure that aims and objectives are achieved.

#### **4. Bottom-up Action**

Youth work and youth policy is most effective at local and regional level due to a close contact to young people’s needs and aspirations. There is traditionally a wide gulf between the local level and Europe, not just structurally, but also politically and philosophically. Municipalities tend to see themselves as entities that are affected by Europe rather than as active European subjects. Yet they and their regional counterparts have a particular responsibility for creating a favourable environment for their young citizens. At the same time, cross-border cooperation can be helpful in shaping effective youth policies on the ground, promoted by regional governments and municipalities.

Therefore,

- New European governance models need to reach out to the local level and local and regional development strategies need to take more Europe into account
- Europe needs to go local and to support regional governments and municipalities to take responsibility for Europe and young people
- Municipalities need spaces and platforms for exchange to experience European identity, to practice cooperation and to enrich the local level with a European dimension. With EUROPE GOES LOCAL<sup>3</sup> such a platform was established in 2016 between around 120 municipalities. This project and similar forms of long-term-cooperation need to be perpetuated and enlarged.

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<sup>3</sup> ↘ [www.europegoeslocal.eu](http://www.europegoeslocal.eu)

## CONCLUSION

### *Europe rewrites Europe’s (hi)story and a new emerging narrative*

There are millions of European “contacts” every single day: at work, at school, at university, in projects and in leisure time. And there are the uncounted individuals in NGOs, in academia, in public-sector organisations and authorities, the private sector and in politics practicing daily European cooperation. There are friendships, teams and collaborators that stretch across the entire continent. There are European families for whom cultural and linguistic diversity is a normal part of their daily lives. These are the real stories about Europe. They tell the story of Europe from the bottom up.

However, we need a new public arena with more spaces, opportunities, talks and dialogues about Europe. And youth work has a major role to play in creating spaces for a new European narrative.

We are convinced that a renewed Europe must be based on some essential principles, at policy level and in civil society including youth work:

- A focus on community-based action applying social, inclusive, fair, participatory and democratic principles which serve citizens and civil society at large.
- A policy that does not divide into winners and losers; European societies must be cohesive and diverse.
- A new European narrative plays a vital role in transforming Europe into a viable living space for all its citizens.
- A new European narrative needs to be written, shaped and brought to life by the younger generation, together with those working in civil society, politics, administration and business.
- Young people & youth work must play an essential role in this respect while keeping a critical look at Europe and resisting discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation.

It is up to us to rewrite the story of an open, social, inclusive and democratic Europe. Let’s get started.