

YOUTH IN EUROPE
OFFENBURG
TALKS “ ”



#2

NATIONALISM, POPULISM
& FAR-RIGHT IDEOLOGIES
AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE
– THE ROLE OF YOUTH WORK
REPORT

2nd-3rd September 2019
ZUM SALMEN, Offenburg

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Some of the issues raised in the 2nd **Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks** on nationalism, populism & far-right ideologies among young people were known and had been anticipated, but the pace and veracity with which the “rise of the Right” has taken place and hold across Europe, among the young too, has surprised (and shocked) policy makers and youth work experts. Too many young people, in particular those living in rural areas, stand for right-wing political parties, for xenophobic, nationalist and authoritarian positions and movements; they are often afraid of falling through the cracks and of “foreign infiltration” and support re-nationalisation. It is not only during elections that right-wing ideologies, populist convictions and traditionalist ethos attract young people who are questioning and often disregarding European values of democracy and pluralism and violating human rights for nationalistic and populist purposes. They criticise societal achievements, such as equal rights, diversity and gender equality; others find their place in traditionalism and neo-conservatism or in virtual and artificial on-line worlds that are full of hate and bigoted ideologies.

Thus, it was obvious that the question of what youth work should do in response to these phenomena was raised; this was the motivation for the topic to be the focus of the second **Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks**. Youth work can't be neutral, and, by its nature, it isn't. Youth work must be based on democratic and social values, intercultural understanding and human rights, and that is why it has to play a central role in countering these ideologies and forms of political engagement of young people. Youth work can strive to change the game by building capacities of young people to deconstruct attempts at manipulation, fear-mongering and distractions, and by facilitating long term emancipatory processes for young people and communities. To do so, the youth participation principle must be put in practice and lived, and youth work needs to collaborate better and create alliances with progressive forces in social work, psychology, formal education, health and more.

Some potential answers as to what youth work needs to do and what the needs of youth work are have been discussed in the talks and are summarised in this report.



INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The series **Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks** are expert workshops on themes and phenomena relevant to the youth sector with an impact on youth policy, youth work practice and young people's lives in general. The talks are organised by a steering group representing five National Agencies of Erasmus+ Youth in Action¹.

The 2nd edition of the **Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks** took place on 2nd and 3rd September 2019 in Salmen², Offenburg. 30 participants exchanged views on the topic *Nationalism, Populism & Far-Right Ideologies among Young People and the Role of Youth Work*. They had been selected on the basis of their expertise in the field and were stimulated by presentations by seven invited experts³ who reflected on various aspects of the topic leading to further discussion.

The aim of the 2nd **Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks** was to explore our understanding of nationalism, populism and far-right ideologies, to look deeper into respective and related phenomena and to differentiate the picture. Another aim was to look at the impact of current trends on youth work and its existing practices and how it can approach young people affected by such ideologies, beliefs and attitudes. It was also discussed how value-based youth work can counter “youth work” of the far-right, populist organisations, in particular in rural and deprived areas, and how specific target groups can be approached e.g. by applying particular methods.

The inputs as well as key points and results of discussions are summarised in this paper⁴.

WHAT WAS THE RATIONALE AND MOTIVATION FOR TALKING ABOUT NATIONALISM, POPULISM AND FAR-RIGHT IDEOLOGIES AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE ROLE OF YOUTH?

A general analysis of the elections of the European Parliament on 26th May 2019 shows that a large majority of citizens, three out of four, voted for pro-European democratic par-

¹ JINT Belgium / Flanders; Archimedes Foundation Estonia; EDUFI Finland; JUGEND für Europa Deutschland; Movit Slovenia and Flemish Community of Belgium, Department for Culture, Youth and Media, Knowledge & Policy Division Belgium / Flanders

² The venue Salmen represents two pillars of German history: on one hand, the civil revolution of 1847/8 with the demands of citizens for freedom, equality and human brother(& sister)hood and, on the other, the extermination of these values during the period of National Socialism in the form of destruction of the local synagogue in the November pogroms of 1938.

³ Beate Küpper, University of Applied Sciences Niederrhein, Germany; Sven Gerst, International Federation of Liberal Youth, Germany; Federico Pozzoni, Italy; Carmine Rodi Falanga, Cooperativa Sociale Muovimente, Italy; Alena Ignatovitch, National Institute for Higher Education, Belarus; Manfred Zentner, Donau-Universität Krems, Austria; ‚Moncho‘ Ramón Martínez, Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe Network, Spain

⁴ This report is largely based on the summaries of four rapporteurs (Ajsa Hadzibegovic, Lana Pasic, Guy Redig, Howard Williamson) and was drafted by Claudius Siebel, JUGEND für Europa and Hanjo Schild, senior expert on youth issues, with support of representatives of the organising National Agencies of Erasmus+ Youth in Action



ties. While the two traditional blocks – centre-right (conservative) and centre-left (social-democrats), which have been the dominating powers in the European Parliament over the years – have lost their majority, two other parties gained ground: on one side, the progressive, green and liberal parties with around 24% of votes, and, on the other, the populist, nationalist and right-wing political parties with nearly 25% of votes. These nationalist and populist parties and movements also represent and/or control some national governments (Hungary, Poland...) or have achieved strong positions in various countries (Italy, France, Belgium, Netherlands...). Voters of these far-right and populist parties often fear loss of social achievements and “foreign infiltration” and support re-nationalisation.

Young people (under 35) supported particularly green, liberal and progressive parties. They were living mostly in cities, were pro-European, but critical of the current performance of EU (climate change, social cohesion, tech giants...), supporting cosmopolitan and progressive answers to current challenges. However, many young people, in particular those in the age group of 25-35 and those living in rural areas, supported right-wing political parties, nationalist and authoritarian positions and movements such as the identitarian movement.

Furthermore, it is not only in elections that right-wing ideologies, populist convictions and a traditionalist ethos attract young people who also seem to be open to simplistic solutions, xenophobic attitudes, discriminatory behaviour and group-focused enmity in their everyday lives. They are questioning and often disregarding European values of democracy, pluralism and human rights and instead believe in concepts of “ethnocentrism” and “homogenous ‘white’ identities”. They criticise societal achievements, such as equal rights, diversity, and gender equality. Others find their place in traditionalism and neo-conservatism or in virtual and artificial online worlds that are full of hate and anti-human ideologies.

Some of the issues raised in the Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks had been anticipated, but the pace and veracity with which the “rise of the Right” has taken place, and nationalism, populism and far-right ideologies have taken hold across Europe, among the young too, has surprised (and shocked) policy makers and youth work experts. At the same time, the public profile of “youth work” has been raised throughout Europe, at least youth work concerned with democracy, equalities, cultural tolerance and human rights. Both the European Union and the Council of Europe have invested considerable attention to development of youth work, and so it was pertinent that the Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks should be asking what youth work could do in response to the changing politics of Europe.

SPOTLIGHTS ON RELEVANT PHENOMENA AND CURRENT POLITICAL CHALLENGES...

In her intervention on *Lost Centre – Hostile Conditions*, **Beate Küpper** invoked an image of an iceberg, in which the democratic position and perspectives expressed on the surface by many “ordinary” people concealed more reactionary feelings resulting from conflicts



over resources, questions of social identity, and concerns about social order. There were logics to right-wing populist rhetoric and the rise of the Right had let the genie out of the bottle, permitting a rejection of mediation and the expression of what has formerly been unpalatable views to be expressed in public.

Sven Gerst's input *Why Populism is neither Left nor Right but Anti-pluralist... and How the Failures of Liberals have Paved the Way for Populism* focused on populism as “anti-pluralism”, outlining its attacks on diversity, multi-party politics, civil society and the rule of law. He talked of “the great realignment”, expressing concern about the “liberal mistake” of blurring and blending many differences in one big pot, of complacency after becoming ascendant after the “end of history”, and of failing to grasp the erosion and diminution of the “big idea” of right v left, which has now been replaced by populism v pluralism.

In his analysis *Anti-Immigration and Anti-Muslim Prejudices: the Case of Matteo Salvini and Lega's Election Campaign 2018 in Italy*, **Federico Pozzoni** looked at the rise, rise and rise (?) of Matteo Salvini and the Northern League, and his anti-immigrant, anti-elite and anti-euro stance, and call for secession and autonomy. The key elements of his populist success have been his charismatic leadership, his appeal to the “people” (and against elites and “others”) and his emotionalised rhetoric.

In his contribution *Are Trolls Winning the Meme Wars? The Spread of Radical Extremism in the Online and Offline Worlds*, **Carmine Rodi Falanga** asked what young people really want: to be part of a community, but also to break the rules. Online trolling is part of a counter-culture. Memes promote a “calculated ambivalence”, enabling people to be part of a group and normalising difficult topics. Within the troll culture, liberal and politically correct frameworks are viewed as censorship – there is a huge “community” sharing “free speech”. The culture originated from anti-feminist and white supremacist positions but is now anchored in “cumulated prejudice”; and trolls are now fully aware of their power.

In her speech *Prevention of Youth Radicalisation and Promoting Democracy: European Soft Measures Examples Analysis*, **Alena Ignatovitch** considered the prevention of radicalisation, particularly through the training of “first line” practitioners. Many factors contribute to young people's vulnerability and journey towards radicalisation. There are both push and pull factors and the problem is that prevention is hard to measure. The key to prevention, however, is the provision of alternative narratives: “let's talk about it”. Thus, there is a need to build an online repository of successful practices through exchanging ideas and critically navigating through available case studies.

With *Youth Worker's Perception of Extreme Behaviour*, **Manfred Zentner** presented the results of the project Providing Perspectives – Preventing Violence. He was concerned with youth workers' perceptions of what constituted extreme behaviour in young people. After all, youth workers may often be aligned with the radical views of young people; there can be nothing wrong with radicalism, or even extremism, except when it involves violence. But then what constitutes violence – its causes, correlations, pre-dispositions, and



consequences? And there are at least three levels of intervention by youth work: a general level, a more targeted level, and the level of “indicated prevention” when more specialist professional intervention is required. But youth work, from Zentner’s research, is so diverse in so many respects that the biggest challenge is perhaps to reach a shared definition and understanding of the “extreme behaviour” that youth work needs to be addressing.

Finally, **Moncho Ramón Martínez** talked about his work through DARE and the findings of a recent research study *Populism and the Role of Youth Work*. Populism is influencing youth work, he suggested, through peddling mistrust, violence and questioning of democracy. He argued that youth work had to stop being reactive and needed to become more assertively proactive, promoting human rights and citizenship, creating spaces for questioning and challenging. He said it was ironic that youth work is now often defending “what we used to fight against”, such as convention and the “establishment”. Youth work was in danger and needed to stand up for itself through innovation and advocacy.

... AND THE ROLE OF YOUTH WORK

Summing up, the deepest foundations of our liberal, pluralistic and solidarity-based democracy seem to be under siege. In this situation, youth work can’t be neutral, and, by its nature, it isn’t, even when it appears so. Youth work must be based on democratic and social values, intercultural understanding and human rights, and this is why it has to play a central role in countering these ideologies and forms of political engagement of young people for nationalistic, populist and xenophobic purposes. The values that we stand for in European youth work and youth policy should be lived, practised and promoted by all actors in the field.

Youth work can strive to change the game by building capacities of young people to deconstruct attempts at manipulation, fear-mongering and distractions, and by facilitating long-term emancipatory processes for young people and communities. To do so, the youth participation principle must be put in practice and lived, and youth work needs to collaborate better and create alliances with progressive forces in social work, psychology, formal education, health and more. The paradigm of “what youth issues are” needs to entail much more than what it traditionally did, and young people are the ones entitled to create new and alternative narratives which challenge and help young people think.

The ideological debate about the value and content of the youth work engagement must be raised and it provokes questions such as: Isn’t it an expression of political engagement and the wish to participate when right-wing young people engage in their virtual and real communities? Isn’t the rising populism a reaction to the dissatisfaction of young people with the current system and a search for feeling of belonging, acceptance and identity? If we approach youth work as an ideological concept, the specificity of youth work can be described as a “set”, an integrated and comprehensive package of values, persuasions and convictions. But then we have to ask if youth work can convey “acceptance” of young people on the extreme right and show them “empathy” and “unconditional positive regard”?

On the other side, governments and policy makers often treat youth work as an



instrument to deal with pop-up problems of the day. Youth work is regarded as a suitable instrument to attack dangerous tendencies; through youth work, government policies try to combat unwanted developments. Youth work is often instrumentalised in an undesirable way to serve the free market, to stimulate better employability, reducing it to an educational dimension or used as a preventive tool against all forms of radicalisation, hooliganism, drug addiction etc. It remains a challenge to youth workers and young people themselves and seems to be one of the biggest threats to the youth work ideology, causing an inversion of values because secondary effects become priority. The primary characteristics of youth work become undermined, and it risks losing its force and identity. But what does this mean for youth work with young people attracted by far-right, nationalistic and xenophobic ideologies?

The challenge of reaching young people before we lose them remains, which is why youth work needs to engage early and never cut the line of communication to young people. Nevertheless, it is certainly useful to distinguish different groups of young people and the role youth work plays for them:

- those in the middle/mainstream for whom the base line is youth work for democracy, rights and resilience,
- those more on the edge and “at risk” for whom youth work, as a first-line response, provides an environment that allows them “to be young together” as well as supports focused and “targeted” intervention and dialogue,
- those already embroiled in the far right who need highly specialist “second-line” response from youth work, offering exit strategies and alternative pathways.

Young people are not isolated, they function within the system, so youth work needs to consider that it is not only school and education that forms their opinions, but also the wider or closer community and institutions within which they find themselves.

Therefore, youth work must be present on a very local scale; proximity to the daily lives of children and young people is necessary to score the maximum of positive effects. Local governments need to give a wide variety of youth work initiatives as much “space” as possible without too much bureaucratic and educational control, and instead offer respectful coaching, stimulating autonomy and self-organisation. This is only possible with relevant and suitable financial and practical support. There is especially a need for professional youth workers to reach “difficult” target groups and to work with those who are often not able to organise themselves or who are without the support of surrounding systems. Local youth work initiatives need support and coaching provided by more centralised youth structures. At this level they must find opportunities to exchange experiences, for training, for renewal and inspiration to be able to survive and succeed.

In a nutshell, and to sum up, youth work needs

- to start with a strong belief in the strength and resilience of young people, acting in a framework of optimism, without blind naivety



- to offer sustained dialogue with young people, on- and offline, and to talk with, not over them and to learn from them
- to encourage young people to take responsibility and be accountable, to get them organise themselves and to become co-owners of their projects by offering “space” for autonomy
- to listen to the concerns of young people and to explore how they feel about their place and position in society
- to mainstream youth work and to reach out to all groups of young people, in particular those on the edge or “at risk”
- to become more proactive while providing spaces for free and critical thinking, questioning and challenging while promoting human rights and active citizenship
- to facilitate emancipatory processes for young people and communities and put the youth participation principle in practice (co-ownership)
- to make these concerns the subject of joint reflection and make them public in their communities, thus providing alternative narratives
- to establish purposeful partnerships and alliances with progressive and democratic forces in related social and political spheres.

There are limits to what youth work can achieve and it cannot save the world, but it does have some power and responsibility and can help

- build social norms, develop empathy, promote emotional intelligence, empowerment and emancipation,
- foster inclusion, values of active democracy and norms, community engagement and build resilience
- offer exit strategies for young people caught up in right-wing extremism.

Thus, youth work can play a modest but an important, sometimes even an exceptional role in tackling the severe threats facing our democracy. However, there needs to be a more in-depth understanding of those threats in order to develop a more tuned-in and calibrated youth work response.

This paper was drafted by five National Agencies of the EU Programme ERASMUS+ Youth in Action organising the series Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks, namely:

