

Thessaloniki - 2014 European Youth Capital:

a city, a title and youth information and counselling services

An interview with Babis Papaioannou by Matina Magkou

Images provided by Babis Papaioannou and Yiannis Boutaris



The "European Youth Capital" (EYC) is the title awarded to a European city for the period of one year, during which it will be given the chance to showcase, through a multi-faceted programme, its youth-related cultural, social, political and economic life and development. The EYC initiative encourages the implementation of new ideas and innovative projects, with regard to active participation of young people in society, and seeks to present a role model for the further development of youth policies in other European municipalities.¹



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youthcapital

1. To learn more: <http://europeanyouthcapital.org>
(date accessed 17.07.2013)

You don't become a European Youth Capital every day. Having this "young" but still prestigious title is of a great importance for a city and a unique opportunity to invest in youth. How is the issue of youth information and counselling treated by a youth capital? Thessaloniki has the title in 2014 and *Coyote* interviewed Babis Papaioannou, Co-ordinator of Thessaloniki 2014, to find out what the city plans in this direction.

What has been the situation concerning information and counselling services in Thessaloniki and in Greece in general until now?

Allow me to start by giving you some historical background of youth policy in Greece. The first time that the government and the public sector in general paid any attention to youth policy was in 1982, which brought in the same year the establishment of the General Secretariat for Youth. Since then, several structures for youth information and counselling were developed (under the title of youth information centres); first in Athens and Thessaloniki (during the 1980s) and then to the rest of the country (during the 1990s).

The youth information centres achieved very impressive results in certain cases concerning youth information, youth mobility and support for local action, while also successfully connecting their work with that of the local NGOs. These centres methodically encouraged hundreds if not thousands of young people to be active in projects with the EU, the Council of Europe or other organisations. Today, the centres still exist, but in my opinion, in a different form which is not really connected with the modern times and challenges. For example, some of these centres aren't up-to-date on the Internet, they don't use social media, they don't follow or constructively support youth NGOs and they cannot help young people to respond to the recent crisis. It is easier for a young person in Athens, in Thessaloniki or in Greece in general, to find the information he or she seeks on the Internet and social networks or through a student or youth NGO than through some of the existing centres.

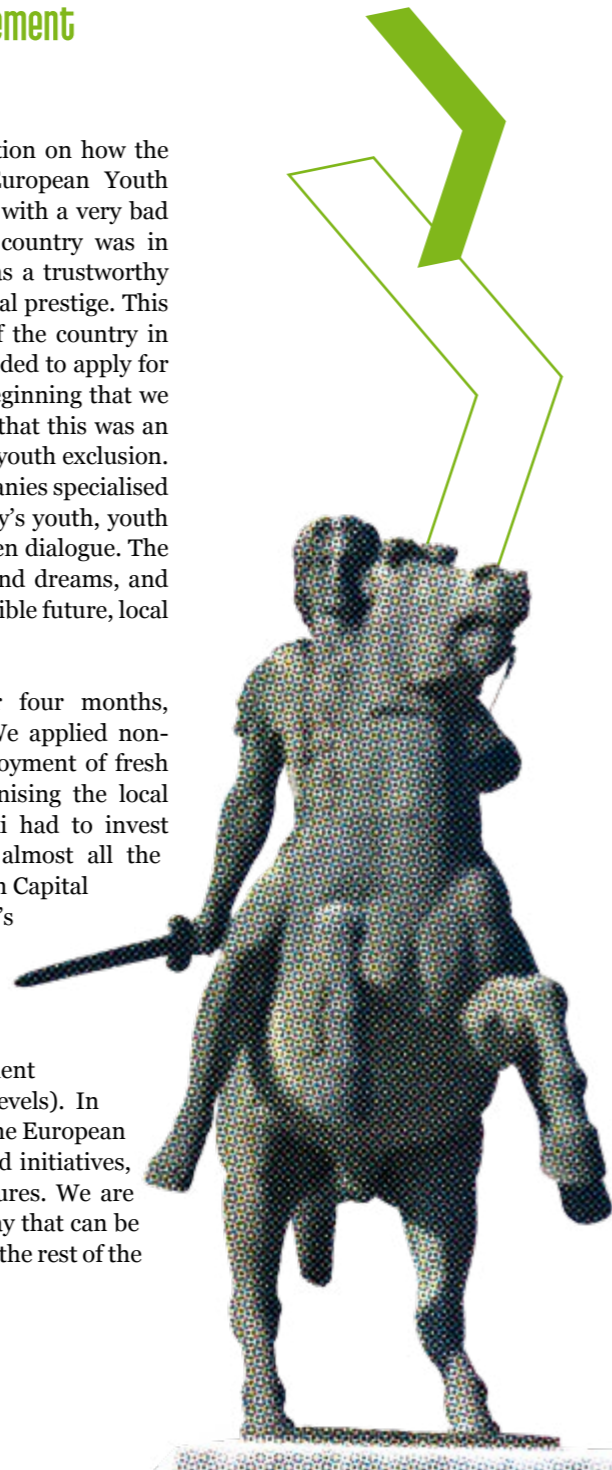




How did the title of the European Youth Capital change this for you? And in general how can the title boost the establishment or improvement of these services?

Again we should start by providing some information on how the municipality of Thessaloniki won the title of European Youth Capital. I believe it is interesting since it coincides with a very bad moment in Greek history. In January 2011, the country was in the eye of the storm; Greece was not considered as a trustworthy country and was at its nadir in terms of international prestige. This was the result of the negative news and images of the country in European and global media. This was when we decided to apply for the title for 2014. Moreover, we agreed from the beginning that we were going to be open and democratic. We agreed that this was an opportunity for social innovation and mitigation of youth exclusion. So instead of consulting “experts” and private companies specialised in the development of proposals, we invited the city’s youth, youth NGOs and people involved in youth issues to an open dialogue. The dialogue concerned the city and youth problems and dreams, and provided the space for proposing and exploring possible future, local youth projects.

The results of this process were amazing: for four months, Thessaloniki became an open social laboratory. We applied non-formal education methods which allowed the deployment of fresh suggestions for Thessaloniki’s youth, while recognising the local actions in which the municipality of Thessaloniki had to invest resources for the upcoming period and offered almost all the material which was required for the European Youth Capital candidacy. Moreover, apart from the application’s material, the municipality started to formulate a new local youth policy which focused on youth information and support. The European Youth Capital programme ensures the strengthening of existing youth structures and the enhancement of networking (local, national and international levels). In addition, it is improving the co-operation between the European Youth Capital 2014 team and local youth NGOs and initiatives, while supporting the development of youth structures. We are trying to build and support youth structures in a way that can be sustainable for the municipality of Thessaloniki and the rest of the local municipalities from 2015 onwards.



What have you done so far for youth information and counselling services and what is the profile of the people who offer these services?

For the European Youth Capital 2014 the issue of youth information and counselling is a top priority. In this direction, we have started to circulate a monthly e-newsletter informing the local, national and international communities about activities on youth policy and its implementation and about the activities of the European Youth Capital 2014 programme. On our Facebook page (that counts more than 22 500 friends), we are publishing daily info posts and answers to questions put forward by young people. There one can also find our online helpdesk.

The municipality of Thessaloniki, taking the opportunity of the European Youth Capital programme, is continuing a social experiment in the city with the aim to establish this dialogue in a continuous way; it has created youth counselling and youth support structures with the active participation of young people and youth NGOs. From the experience until now, we can see that people who are engaged with the youth movement field and youth NGOs, and are aware of current European youth policies, can provide more effective youth solutions and proposals. Moreover, the people that work at the youth centres should be able to understand the EU and Council of Europe communications and actions, while being able to adapt European youth policies to the local level by using open consultation methods and tools (as they derive from non-formal education practices). The European Youth Capital 2014 team members, who deal with these issues, have the characteristics described above and have been or still are active members of civil society in Thessaloniki.

From the inquiries you have received so far, what kind of information do young people from Thessaloniki need?

Concerning the type of questions submitted to the European Youth Capital 2014 until now, the statistics show that the dominant (45%) interest lies in proposals for local projects. Most people have good ideas but they don’t know how to finance them. The second type of question (30%) concerns youth employment, youth entrepreneurship, the social economy and even requests for a job. The third type (20%) concerns establishing international co-operation and international good practices exchange. Also, some want just to communicate their experience of programmes which have already taken place in some other parts of the world. Finally, a small percent (5%) is what we call “building youth policy” which includes institutional issues. This type tries to establish an interactive relationship between young people and the municipality of Thessaloniki that embraces participation and co-decision taking for young people.

On one hand, we aim to be consistent and to answer all the questions and proposals from the young people or older people who are concerned about youth. On the other hand, we try to extract conclusions on the trends in Thessaloniki and what the main problems are, while having in our minds that the crisis is still present in the city and the country. By using this prism, we work to respond to questions that address the most crucial current youth problems.

Have you been inspired by any other European cities for your work in this direction?

In the last three years, we have travelled a lot across Europe and elsewhere in order to study good examples and practices in the youth field, including procedures for constructive co-operation between NGOs and municipalities. I should say that we found a lot in Europe. They come from cities that survived periods of de-industrialisation which negatively affected their societies, from cities which were in transition from one social system to another or from cities which were led by an inspired mayor who had a vision and made a difference. I will avoid naming these cities, but I will not avoid saying that we will try to adapt and implement as many good examples as possible. Our goal is to develop a new youth support model, conceived with the Greek reality in mind and which has as its foundations EU and Council of Europe youth policies.

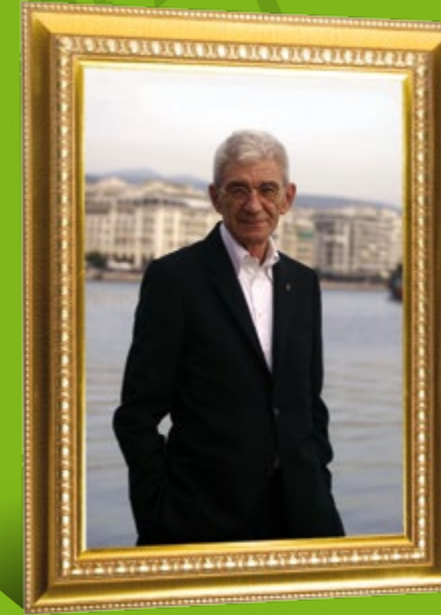
How are you going to ensure that what you do will last after the end of the European Youth Capital year?

The legacy of European Youth Capital 2014 in the city is what concerns us the most. All the people working or volunteering for the European Youth Capital in 2014, from the mayor himself to the local NGOs, are confident that 2014 will be a very interesting year for youth in Thessaloniki and Greece. The coincidence of the Greek EU Presidency in the first semester of 2014, the European Parliament elections in the middle of the year, the EU programming period 2014-2020, the ongoing debate on the future of Europe and the European Agenda 2020 but also the anxious

effort of the Greek youth to survive this socio-economic crisis all provide an amazing, creative and challenging environment.

Our goal for 2015 and onwards takes into consideration all the efforts and huge resources invested by the municipality from 2011 to 2014 and has three axes. The first axis is the development of a permanent structure for local youth information and support. This structure can be the conversion to a complex youth information centre which will take advantage of the local experience and conserve interactive youth spaces (there is no such structure currently in Thessaloniki). The second axis is the establishment and maintenance of open, effective and democratic permanent youth consultation processes for the municipality of Thessaloniki. This process will start by the development of a local youth action plan which takes into consideration the proposals of the Council of Europe on local youth participation and on the Local Youth Council Foundation, as it is a good tool for ensuring tangible positive effects for young people. The third axis is the repetition and institutionalisation of the best actions of the European Youth Capital 2014 programme. The crucial criterion for selecting the best actions is going to be their acceptance by local young people.

The European Youth Capital 2014 is a big bet. We are taking the bet and we have to prove both to the European Youth Forum, which trusted us with the title, and to the local youth that we can respond to their expectations. We are obliged to win the bet, especially for the local youth. They have believed in the municipality and in the city and they have supported our actions from the very beginning. And so did the rest of the citizens who celebrated with us when Thessaloniki was declared the next European Youth Capital. We believe that the legacy of Thessaloniki as capital will be only positive, not only for the youth of Thessaloniki, but for the entire city.



MESSAGE FROM THE MAYOR

Youth participation and volunteerism were the core values at the heart of our candidacy in 2011 for the European Youth Capital 2014, which was prepared and submitted in collaboration with 150 youth organisations of the city and more than 250 volunteers. Hosting the European Youth Capital is a unique opportunity for us to create a communication platform for our youth to openly discuss and exchange ideas.

Additionally, it gave us the chance to re-activate the Youth Information Centre Network, in collaboration with the General Secretariat for Youth. The main offices of the youth information centre are now at the city hall and this allows us to considerably improve the information and counselling services provided to young people. We see the European Youth Capital 2014 as an opportunity to build long-lasting infrastructure in the service of our youth.

Yiannis Boutaris
Mayor of Thessaloniki



MEMO ON BABIS PAPAIOANNOU

Babis Papaioannou is a youth worker and is currently the Co-ordinator of the European Youth Capital Thessaloniki 2014. He has been active in the civil society of his city for more than 25 years and has a lot of experience on youth issues in South-East Europe. He is a founding member of the Network of Voluntary Organisations of the city of Thessaloniki and has been a member of the board of the European Youth Forum.

