

Chapter 13

Interview with Peter Matjašič, President of the European Youth Forum

Being a young person in Europe today and being the President of the organisation representing young people in Europe, what elements do you think make young people in the continent feel “disconnected”? And what realities make them feel “connected”?

We live in a very complex world of interconnectedness and interdependence between individuals, groups, societies, policies, technologies and freedoms. Talking about feeling disconnected or connected is very difficult in general terms as it always depends on each individual and his/her own reality. Young people in particular are literally wired to the world so the factor of being connected is real and strong. The question is rather dis/connected from/to what? One can be connected to friends via social networks from another part of the globe and be completely disconnected from the community in which one resides. A young person might feel more at home and real in the virtual space than in the physical space surrounding him/her and these are new realities we must learn to respect and understand. If we think about the world of politics and decision making that influence our daily lives then I'd say that the problem lies not in the lack of interest from young people but rather the lack of recognition, respect and support for youth and youth organisations to be fully integrated in decision making and policy making processes in areas that affect them. On the one hand young people get consulted more than in the past but the real inclusion and respect for their views is as far from reality as ever.

In the first volume of *Perspectives on youth* we were focusing on the future of youth policy and young people in 2020. What do you think will be the major challenges then?

I think some basic things never change. Youth policy will continue fighting for its place among other policies and seek a much-needed balance between its independence and its cross-sectoral nature when it comes to catering for the needs of young people and advancing their rights. Young people will continue to care about things that most affect their lives: quality education, meaningful participation in democratic life and society, transition between education and labour market, quality jobs and generally about opportunities to be mobile, to start a family, to become autonomous. Moreover, the demographic structure of the continent will be a driving force in economic and political choices. Without a pact between generations, this will seriously affect the autonomy and well-being of young people and the planet that future generations must inherit. The youth sector of civil society will face increasing challenges to gain support for its mission to build a more inclusive Europe and to ensure that the voice and concerns of young people are not only heard, but also acted upon in policies and programmes.

How connected do you think young people in Europe are with the idea of Europe? How has the European Youth Forum contributed to young people feeling more connected to Europe?

I believe that today's youth in Europe take European integration for granted and as a given – and this is not a bad thing! Most young people in the current European Union grew up in times of peace and prosperity. They enjoy the freedoms and rights provided to them by the EU, particularly when it comes to learning mobility opportunities through programmes such as Erasmus or other important non-formal education possibilities such as youth exchanges, European Voluntary Service and youth training via the Youth in Action programme. The idea of Europe is something emotional rather than rational for most. It is based on the (positive and/or negative) experiences of living in Europe. For most young people it is perfectly normal to travel around the continent, have friends from different countries, speak at least one foreign language, and enjoy eating all types of food. Turkish kebab is for them as European as Spanish paella, Swedish meatballs, Belgian fries or Italian pasta. The Youth Forum has contributed to bringing down walls and prejudices between Europe's youth by offering their youth representatives a platform to meet and exchange. A place where young Azerbaijanis feel as European as young Portuguese, where young Norwegians share their concerns about youth policy with their Cypriot colleagues. The Youth Forum is truly a meeting point of cultures and in each meeting we live the motto "united in diversity". It helps build bridges between individuals, groups and countries and makes young people realise that despite sometimes very significant differences in their daily realities they all aspire to the same goals: better education, better job opportunities, more investment in youth, more respect for their views and more meaningful engagement in decision making on issues that matter to them!

Is the connection (or disconnection) of young people reflected in their participation in European Parliament elections?

Total voter turnout has declined at all seven elections since 1979, dropping to just 43% in 2009. Of that, youth turnout has been among the largest decliners, sliding

to 29% in 2009 from around 33% in 2004. This could be explained by the theory – supported by the findings of an LSE (London School of Economics and Political Science) study on Youth Participation in Democratic Life from January 2013 – that there is a true democratic demand from young people, but one which they think is not well matched by the current political offer. The same LSE study found that a clear majority of youth respondents claims to be interested in politics. Young people are not bored with politics, they are fed up with feeling that those who “do” politics do not care about them. This is a crucial finding and one that shows that in all likelihood, the downward trend of youth participation could indeed be reversed. The League of Young Voters project – initiated by the Youth Forum together with VoteWatch Europe and IDEA International – tackles exactly this point. It is a politically neutral initiative that aims to amplify young people’s concerns and expectations in the run-up to European elections. It is not just an initiative to get young people to vote – it is a movement that brings together all young people who want to choose what decisions Europe and its politicians will make on issues that concern them.

What is the contribution of the European Youth Forum’s campaign Love the Future in this direction?

Our LoveYouthFuture (LYF) campaign is the Youth Forum’s contribution to the European parliamentary elections in 2014. While the aforementioned League of Young Voters is a project implemented with other partners encouraging voter turnout among young people, the LYF campaign presents our key policy demands towards the next European Parliament and European Commission. Young people are more crucial to Europe’s future, now more than ever. That is why the Youth Forum has created a list of 11 pledges outlining how the EU can love its young people, both now and in the future, and asks MEP candidates to make their pledge to youth. Among these pledges is the idea of an ombudsperson for young people to defend their rights, and to end age discrimination through the adoption of the Anti-Discrimination Directive. Another pledge promotes the free movement of young people in Europe by working to reduce limitations and barriers to youth mobility through strengthened and more accessible mobility programmes and also by promoting visa liberalisation for young people. In times of crisis and skyrocketing youth unemployment, the pledge to support the implementation of an ambitious Europe-wide Youth Guarantee which fights youth unemployment and a pledge to promote policies towards an equal and inclusive labour market providing quality jobs for young people are needed more than ever if we want to avoid the risk of a “lost generation”. Moreover, our member organisations are committed to working on promoting the voice of young people during the elections and encouraging them to get out and vote.

