

Introduction by the editorial team

Dear readers,

Welcome to “Perspectives on youth: European Youth Partnership Series”. We, the board of publishers and the editorial team of this new journal, are happy to present the second issue of this series.

CONNECTIONS AND DISCONNECTIONS

The pilot issue of *Perspectives on youth* had the futuristic theme of “2020 – what do YOU see?”. We set out to retain a forward-looking orientation in the second issue, while also addressing some key contemporary questions and challenges. The theme of this issue is “connections and disconnections” and in our call for papers we suggested that possible topics might include migration, employment mobility, new familial relations, the Internet and new media, young people’s social and political engagement, their connections with their own countries, with Europe or the wider world, and intercultural contacts in general. We were very pleased that the range of submissions we received dealt with most of these topics, and with others besides.

In choosing the overall theme and in selecting papers for inclusion our interest has been in the potential benefits but also the tensions and contradictions that are inherent in contemporary social, cultural, economic and technological changes. On the one hand such changes are creating opportunities for young people to connect in new and positive ways with other young people, with their families and communities and with social institutions such as the education and training systems, employment, politics and the media, and to do so in ways that increasingly cross various borders. On the other hand, it is clear that such changes do not always take place in a smooth or mutually complementary way: expanded opportunities for online communication are not necessarily accompanied by enhanced opportunities for physical mobility; greatly increased participation in higher education has not translated into more and better employment prospects for young people (quite the reverse); European societies and communities are increasingly diverse (in terms for example of culture, religion or family formation) and yet this is perceived by some as a threat rather than an opportunity, leading to the potential for an increasing sense of disconnection for some groups of young people in particular.

A related question arises as to whether the policies that are designed both to shape and respond to young people's circumstances and the practices that flow from these policies across the full range of administrative, economic and professional sectors (employment, education and training, justice, health, migration and so on) are themselves appropriately connected or disconnected with each other, at all levels from the local to the international.

In the light of the last point it was timely that just as the work on this issue of *Perspectives on youth* was nearing completion the European Commission–Council of Europe Youth Partnership hosted a conference in Budapest on the theme "Youth in 2020 – the Future of Youth Policies". One of the conference organisers was **Professor Howard Williamson**, who is also a member of the Editorial Team of *Perspectives on youth*. Given that addressing the policy dimension is an important part of the overall purpose of this series, the current issue therefore begins with a reflection by Howard Williamson on the discussions and conclusions of that conference, set in the context of his own many years' experience of youth-related policy and practice: "Sniffing glue – scanning some horizons for youth policy in 2020". While the conference was not explicitly designed to link with the theme of this issue, it is nonetheless significant that several of the common themes and transversal issues identified as arising from the conference do indeed touch on matters of connection/disconnection, including the alienating impact of youth unemployment, the need for intergenerational and intercultural solidarity, the role of new social media and the importance of inter-organisational co-operation and knowledge sharing. Moreover, the "glue" that is metaphorically referred to in the paper's title and content is above all else about social connectivity and cohesion.

Abdeslam Badre, who was a participant at the same conference, discusses the aftermath of the Arab Spring in the article "Will the Arab youth reap the harvest of the "spring" any day soon?" He states that disconnection remains the predominant feeling among Arab youth. Although young people were perceived as an important resource during the Arab Spring, and their expectations were therefore greatly heightened, these have not been fulfilled. Increased youth unemployment, inadequate social services and mistrust in political institutions are prevalent across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The author suggests that fair and adequate living conditions among Arab youth are central to future political stability and economic development. Creating not just increased employment but high-quality jobs is a key political challenge for the region. The author also stresses the pivotal role of comprehensive, rights-based social policies and programmes for young people to assist them in accumulating critical assets during their transition years. Ensuring the participation of young people and youth organisations in the mainstream of socio-political and economic institutions is also considered key.

The following article also has a link with the Youth in 2020 event, in this case being based on one of the conference papers. Moreover, it further elaborates on the (dis)connection between youth and political systems. In "Youth and politics: towards a new model of citizenship in advanced democracies", **Anne Muxel** takes us back to Europe and suggests that the triptych of mistrust, abstention and political protest is, to a greater or lesser extent, common to all categories of young people (as well as many adults) in European societies today. However, she suggests that this can

be seen “more as a sign of the emergence of a new model of citizenship” than as representing a crisis in democracy. She cautions that if the emerging patterns of political engagement are to have positive rather than negative consequences then three things are required of public policy: a greater focus on intergenerational solidarity (“it is absolutely essential to think of all the generations together rather than separately”); an urgent response to young people’s twofold demand for integration and autonomy; and a “new citizens’ pact laying down the building blocks for the future of our European democracies”.

These arguments complement those of **Metka Kuhar** and **Tanja Oblak Črnič** in the article “Social contexts of political (non-)participation among Slovenian youth”. Kuhar and Oblak Črnič suggest that among young people in Slovenia there is an increasing “connection inwards”, a turning towards the immediate circle of family and friendship and at the same time a turning away from conventional political participation. However, this does not necessarily mean that young people are less socially engaged. The authors highlight the importance of the Internet as “the space for young people” today, in Slovenia and elsewhere, and argue that youth policies at national and European level should take more account of everyday youth culture and “media consumption by a digital generation”, interacting with young people “in their own language, in their own communication style and according to their own tastes”.

The next two articles throw light, from different perspectives, on issues related to mobility and migration. **Simona Isabella** and **Giuliana Mandich** adopt an innovative approach to the study of mobility in “Connecting to the future: the role of spatial mobilities in young people’s imagined biographies”. Their paper is based on an analysis of 250 essays written by 18 and 19-year-old students in Sardinia who were asked to imagine they were 90 and to tell the story of their lives. The authors find that mobility features prominently in the students’ narratives, whether as a “dreamt travel experience”, an account of migration (perhaps based on actual experience) that will hopefully realise professional and personal ambitions, or in a form influenced by popular TV fiction. However, they suggest that in these accounts mobility commonly appears to be a kind of magical device that helps to bypass uncertainty and “somehow seems to substitute [for] concrete biographical projects in young people’s narratives of the future”. They argue that a “rhetoric of mobility” is not enough to empower young people and that more practical support is necessary, particularly from educational institutions.

In “What lies behind school failure, youth gangs and disconnections with the host society for the second generation?”, **Maria Ron Balsera** presents a case study of young people of Latin American origin in Spain. Noting that such young people have more in common with the host culture than some other immigrant groups and yet experience significant xenophobia, educational barriers and economic disadvantages, she asks, “So if it is not language or religion that hinders their integration, then what does? There are many idiomatic and cultural differences which are often ignored”. An important point of this paper is that in addition to issues of culture and ethnicity there are clear and intertwined gender, social class, labour market and age-related patterns underlying migrants’ experiences of inequality.

The themes of gang involvement, migration and fragmented cultural ties link this text to our next contribution, “Youth initiatives in the context of extremism: the Chechnya

case". However, **Evgeniya Goryushina** speaks of young people in their home region and not children from immigrant families in another country. In its references to a post-conflict situation, adverse socio-economic circumstances and political mistrust, the text also bears comparison with the contribution of Abdeslam Badre to this issue. Exploring a topic about which there is very little existing academic research, and therefore necessarily adopting a more descriptive and journalistic approach than some other contributors to this issue, Evgeniya Goryushina relates the context for current youth initiatives in the Chechen Republic to an analysis of the social marginalisation of young Chechens and the spread of extremist ideas. She suggests that there is a need for greater dialogue and understanding with young people in the Chechen Republic in order for stronger connections to be fostered between their cultural and ethnic roots and their economic and social futures.

The following three contributions also deal with young people who are vulnerable or at risk in some way and whose disconnection stems from this. In "Responding to youth crime: reconnecting the disconnected", **Jonathan Evans** considers the nature of young people's offending and appropriate societal and policy responses. He argues that, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and international conventions relating to juvenile justice, young people below the age of majority should be dealt with outside the criminal justice system, an approach that is consistent with both their stage of development and their social status. For those above this age, he suggests there is merit in a "gentle upward gradient towards full criminal responsibility", especially in the case of vulnerable young adults with complex needs such as those leaving care or with mental health problems.

In their study of "Children at Risk", **Nele Havermans, Sarah Botterman and Koen Matthijs** examine "the effects of socio-economic background and family dissolution on children's school engagement". They focus specifically on the mediating role of "family connections", by which they mean the effectiveness and quality of contact among family members – not just between parents and children but also between parents and between siblings. Based on survey results from a sample of 7 035 pupils in Flemish secondary schools (aged 11 to 21), the authors' main conclusion is that the influence of family background on children's school engagement can largely be explained by disconnections at the family level, and that as a consequence "policy and practice aimed at the social inclusion of youth should take the family into account". The authors also recommend further research into the perspectives of parents and teachers on these matters.

Katerina Flora reports on the preliminary findings of a seven-country European study of "Internet addiction disorder among adolescents and young adults", involving more than 13 000 respondents aged 14 to 17. Various terms have emerged in the research literature to refer to the condition under investigation, the key symptoms of which are constant preoccupation with the Internet, withdrawal from other pleasurable activities or from direct personal contact with friends and family, and increased feelings of depression, irritation and anxiety. While for obvious reasons the phenomenon is relatively new the authors suggest that it may have certain aetiological features in common with other addictions. Once again important matters of policy and practice arise as the author considers possible responses in both treatment and prevention, so as to counteract the "disconnection from other forms of support, information, orientation and entertainment".

Marko Orel addresses some of the practical challenges facing young people who are attempting to engage in entrepreneurial activity. “Working in co-working spaces: the social and economic engagement of European youth” takes as its starting point a case study of one young Slovenian man who conceived and designed an original and attractive product but was hindered from making any further progress by the lack of financial resources, investment offers, marketing or promotional expertise until he entered into collaboration with a team of other young professionals. Co-working is presented as more than just the sharing of physical space: it is a philosophy that encourages spontaneous networking between professionals of various profiles and interests and that “emphasises the psychological and social importance of such interactions”. Striking a note that resonates strongly with the theme of this issue the author says that many European young people “have already recognised that they are better off within a group and are looking for others who think alike, not only within national borders, but far beyond”.

We began this editorial with a reference to the Youth in 2020 conference and have included some contributions by conference participants in this issue. A marked feature of the Youth in 2020 conference was the large and diverse attendance of people from all corners of Europe. As one of the last contributions in this issue, we include a personal interview with Doris Pack, who was a member of the European Parliament for almost a quarter of a century. While not denying the risks and challenges for youth policy in Europe – some of which are discussed in this issue – Doris Pack shares with us her optimistic vision of the (future) connections between young people and Europe. We close with a consideration of “connections and disconnections” from the perspective of the contemporary generation of youth in Europe, in an interview with Peter Matjašič, President of the European Youth Forum.

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