

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



Analytical Paper¹ IDENTITY AND AUTONOMY

Theme 1: Belonging - Theme 2: Agency & Empowerment

Max Fras

This analytical paper explores issues related young people's identity and autonomy through two sub-themes, namely (1) young people's belonging and (2) young people's agency and empowerment.

The paper is informed by the outcomes of the Symposium 'Youth Policy Responses to the Contemporary Challenges Faced by Young People' (held in Prague between the 12th and the 14th of June 2017)², notably the 'teasers' introducing both sub-themes and discussions held by symposium participants including sharing good practice examples, identifying key issues and formulating key messages.

The first sub-theme – **belonging** – refers to young people's sense of belonging to the community and society they live in. This covers aspects of equality and inequality (discrimination, social inclusion and power relations) as well as the potential ways of improving the conditions of welcoming and making young people feel 'at home' through integration and intercultural dialogue. The subjective character of belonging and its

¹ The opinions expressed in this work, commissioned by the European Union–Council of Europe youth partnership, are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of either of the partner institutions, their member states.

² Symposium 'Youth Policy Responses to the Contemporary Challenges Faced by Young People, available at: <http://pip-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/symposium>, last accessed on August 1, 2017.

relationship with others in the community is of fundamental importance – young people cannot grant themselves the feeling of belonging if those around them do not want them to belong, make them feel unwelcome and put up barriers that make a sense belonging hard or impossible to achieve.

The second sub-theme theme – **agency and empowerment** – refers to the support young people receive in activating access to their rights especially when conditions of discrimination and exclusion take place. It covers the policy responses increasing youth rights through rights-based approaches and minority rights protection and support in identity formation leading to greater agency and empowerment of young people.

Belonging

Key issues

For a young person to belong is not a personal matter alone, but a social one – ‘if one feels rejected or not welcomed by the people who live in that place, his/her sense of belonging would inevitably be spoiled’.³ Young people’s lives in today’s Europe are strongly affected by the **politics of belonging** - the process of defining the boundaries of communities, of the conditions for being part of a community and the benefits associated with it, and defining the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’.⁴ The absence of belonging can have numerous negative effects and lead to inequality, exclusion, discrimination and marginalization.

Social inclusion and wider social cohesion is threatened by **rising right-wing, nationalist and populist movements and policies**. Those nationalist and populist phenomena tend to frame belonging along closed class, ethnic or racial lines, most often dividing societies between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Two distinct dimensions of the new nationalist-populist movements have direct relevance for young people’s belonging. The first, so-called **‘horizontal’ dimension**, draws a line between insiders and outsiders within the political community: on one side, ‘people like us’,

³ Jayaweera, H. and Choudhury, T., 2008, *Immigration, faith and cohesion. Immigration and inclusion*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in Antonsich, M., 2010

⁴ Yurval-Davis, N., 2006, “Belonging and the politics of belonging”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40:3, p. 197-214.

those who share the purported local way of life, and on the other – who do not follow and threaten it. This covers both ‘internal outsiders’ (residents or even citizens of the state, are not seen as belonging to the nation) and ‘outside outsiders’ such as impersonal forces or institutions threatening identity or security: globalization, international trade, the European Union, radical Islam, or transnational civil society, amongst others.

On the other hand, populism’s **vertical dimension**, constructs an opposition between the common people (and populist groups purporting to represent them) and the ‘elites’ (usually guilty of all the wrongs). Ordinary people are seen as honest and virtuous, struggling, hard-working and sharing a certain common sense, while ‘the elite’ is perceived as self-serving, paralysed by political correctness, distant and indifferent to the concerns and problems of ordinary people.⁵

A number of challenges faced by young people relating to belonging arise from the **integration of young people from migrant backgrounds**, and their ability to feel at home in the place that they live in Europe, as well as for the society around them to view them as full members of the community. Rising nationalism and populism are often connected to an increased anti-immigrant sentiment and discourse affecting large segments of refugee, migrant and minority populations across Europe. The increased negative perceptions of the refugee and asylum crisis in Europe and of refugees and immigrants as a source of economic and social tension and threat to European identity can considerably weakened. Despite a widely recognised need for greater social cohesion, the fear of cultural change among European remains substantial - immigration remains key area of (negative) concern for European Union (EU) citizens. Quite importantly, EU citizens distinguish between more favourable EU migration and less favourable non-EU migration - 61% are positive about migration of people from other EU Member States, but 56% are negative about immigration of people from outside the EU.⁶

The shifting programmes and platforms of contemporary Europe’s populists **escape simple left-right divisions**. The nationalist populist movements in Northern and Western Europe are not always substantively national or nationalist and often position themselves as opposed to old-style nationalism and purportedly progressive or liberal (e.g. defending

⁵ Taguieff, Pierre-André. 1995. “Political Science Confronts Populism: From a Conceptual Mirage to a Real Problem.” *Telos* (103): 9–43.

⁶ Eurobarometer 2016, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/news/autumn-2016-standard-eurobarometer-immigration-and-terrorism-continue-be-seen-most-important_en, last accessed on July 24, 2017.

Europe's liberal order from the Islamic 'threat'). On the other hand, Central and Eastern Europe's populists appear to be nationalist in their manifestos and actions but their economic and social platforms borrow heavily from both leftist and protectionist ideas. The central place of nation and nationalist discourse-framing has not disappeared but has been reframed in in civilizational terms.

Brubakers notes that less emphasis is placed on national differences (notably language and specifically national cultural particularities and traditions), more emphasis on civilizational differences (notably religious traditions and their secular legacies).⁷ This further antagonises social divisions and can lead to alienation and loss of belonging of young people coming from minority and migrant backgrounds, as even the knowledge of language and local traditions – usually easily picked-up by well-established minority and migrant communities – are not deemed sufficient markers of belonging.

Ways forward

In order to enhance young people's sense of belonging, European, national and local policy makers should establish and finance initiatives that promote **positive relationships, intercultural dialogue, citizenship and a sense of solidarity** amongst young people at the local, national, and international levels (including beyond Europe). Youth work approaches should recognise the **multiple identities** that young people may hold, and should support young people to form their **individually unique identity**: all work with and for young people should celebrate young peoples' **diversity whilst emphasising that which they have in common**.

Numerous case studies of intercultural and civic education programmes show that cross-cultural and civic education activities bringing together young people from different background either increase their levels of acceptance of difference⁸ or result in a better understanding of cultural and social diversity.⁹

⁷ Rogers Brubaker (2017) Between nationalism and civilizationism: the European populist moment in comparative perspective, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40:8, 1191-1226.

⁸ Perry, L. B., & Southwell, L. (2011). Developing intercultural understanding and skills: Models and approaches. *Intercultural Education*, 22, 453-466.

⁹ Sandu, O. N. (2015), *Civic and Intercultural Education: A Means for Community Development and Attitude Change*, available at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244015580371>, last accessed on August 7, 2017.

Furthermore, **policy makers at all levels must recognise the critical role of the local context**, and the role that youth work plays in developing young people's citizenship, identity, and sense of belonging. Youth work has been proven to increase young people's resilience and reinforce positive identity.¹⁰

Opportunities should be created at all levels (including beyond Europe) for youth workers and youth organisations to **network, participate in training, and to exchange best practice**. At the same time, decision-makers and youth workers should create **social spaces for young people** so that they experience **belonging as a consequence of communal life**, rather than a struggle to form identity.

Last but not least, in order to anchor the sense of belonging in all levels of social life, young people should be **actively involved in decision-making processes at all levels** to strengthen their sense of belonging to civic life. Young people, particularly those from disadvantaged groups, should be supported to understand their rights and to develop the skills, knowledge and competencies required to **access these rights** (see below).

Agency and empowerment

Young people's agency and empowerment in Europe is strongly affected by growing inequality, **economic insecurity and rising unemployment**, which impact on a young person's ability to achieve a safe and stable material condition, thereby comprising their ability to be active citizens and community members.

Despite fairly stable economic development in most European countries since early 1990s, the **recent economic crisis** took a heavy toll on all European states and young people are very often among those hit the hardest. For the majority of EU countries, after several years of decline, the lowest point was reached between 2012 and 2014. Social conditions and participation **opportunities for young people in most EU countries remain considerably worse than in the pre-crisis period**. According to the Bertelsmann Foundations' social justice study, 27.9% of children and young people in the EU are at risk of poverty or social exclusion— an increase on in the 2007 levels (26.4%).¹¹

¹⁰ Catalano et al. (2002) Positive Youth Development in the United States: Research Findings on Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs, *Prevention & Treatment*, Volume 5, Article 15.

¹¹ Social Justice in the EU, Report 2015, available at: <http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/social-justice-in-the-eu-index-report-2015/>, last accessed on August 11, 2017.

Young people face increased inequality and **social divisions at all levels** – in the family and in relation to older generations, in their home communities and countries and between European countries.

Feeling empowered is an increasing challenge as **transitions from child to adulthood** have become more complex and individualised since 2008 -, child and youth opportunities decreased since 2008 in most European countries.¹² Young people are now more and more **dependent on families** - more live with their parents than before the crisis – this is a substantial change indicating that for the first time in a few generations young people across Europe are likely to be worse off than their parents.¹³ On top of that, there is the continuing trend of a **growing gap between generations** further exacerbating the feeling of disempowerment and lack of agency. While the EU-wide share of children at-risk-of poverty or social exclusion has increased since 2007, the share of older people at-risk-of poverty or social exclusion declined in the same period, from 24.4% in 2007 to the current 17.8% (2013/14).¹⁴

The growing inequality also affects young people from **migrant backgrounds** – across the EU, unemployment among native-born youth with immigrant parents is almost 50 % higher than among other young people in the EU, compounding problems of belonging, inclusion, agency and empowerment in one socio-economic conundrum.¹⁵

Inequality matters not only within countries and communities, but also **between different regions of Europe** – the deepening gap between North and South in Europe raises concerns about intra-European solidarity and leading to tensions between young people in different EU and Council of Europe Member States.¹⁶

As a result, more than half of young people in Europe (57%) have the impression that the young have been marginalised and excluded from economic and social life by the crisis. Giving young people a sense of agency and empowering them to act is both essential and extremely difficult due to the overwhelming feeling of exclusion and powerlessness caused by social and economic factors.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Desilver, D., 'In the U.S. and abroad, more young adults are living with their parents', available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/05/24/in-the-u-s-and-abroad-more-young-adults-are-living-with-their-parents/>, last accessed on August 5, 2017.

¹⁴ Social Justice in the EU, Report 2015, op. cit.

¹⁵ OECD - Understanding the Socio-Economic Divide in Europe, available at: <https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/cope-divide-europe-2017-background-report.pdf>, last accessed on October 9, 2017.

¹⁶ Social Justice in the EU, Report 2015, op.cit.

Ways forward

In order to address the disempowerment of youth, European, national and local policy makers must recognise **the critical role that youth work plays in promoting youth empowerment**. Opportunities should be created for youth workers and youth organisations to **share practice, tools and effective approaches to promoting youth empowerment and youth social action**. Young people should be supported to be active and empowered citizens through **programmes at all levels**. The Council of **Europe's unique Co-Management approach**¹⁷ could be used as a blueprint for including young people in decision making and could be adopted across public institutions at all levels in order to strengthen young peoples' influence in decision-making processes across Europe.

Awareness and understanding of rights-based frameworks should be increased amongst young people, youth workers, and policy makers, and policy makers should establish effective mechanisms to report and respond to rights violations. Rights-based approaches provide young people with a solid legal and moral basis to demand action and access to rights, framing youth rights not in terms of needs or requirements but European community's obligations to respond and protect inalienable rights of individual young people and groups thereof and empowering them to demand justice.¹⁸

¹⁷ Council of Europe Co-Management and Decision-Making, available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/co-management-and-decision-making>, last accessed on October 9, 2017.

¹⁸ European Youth Forum - Definition of Rights-Based Approach, available at: <http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2013/07/0334-14-RBA-definition-YFJ1.pdf>, last accessed on October 9, 2017.