

# PERSPECTIVES ON YOUTH CONNECTIONS and DISCONNECTIONS



Volume 2

## Youth Partnership

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



EUROPEAN UNION

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CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

# **PERSPECTIVES ON YOUTH CONNECTIONS and DISCONNECTIONS**

**Volume 2**

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# Introduction by the editorial team

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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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## Chapter 1

# “Sniffin’ glue” – Scanning some horizons for youth policy in 2020

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*Howard Williamson*

### **INTRODUCTION**

When The Sex Pistols emerged in 1976/77 at a time of social unrest and emergent austerity, a young punk called Mark P established the leading punk fanzine of its day – Sniffin’ Glue – with articles and cartoons depicting the angst of the young.

Some 30 years ago I wrote a short article based on my experiences as a practising youth worker, during which I was witnessing the struggles facing more and more young people in making what came to be known as “transitions to adulthood”. These changing and increasingly complex transitions are now well rehearsed in academic literature where the multiple transitions (from school to work, families of origin to families of destination, dependent housing to independent living and more) and their associated challenges have been repeatedly documented, with – though there are some exceptions (Leccardi and Ruspini 2006, Helve and Evans 2013) – incessant and uniform repetition. My practice piece, entitled “Struggling Beyond Youth” (Williamson 1985), suggested speculatively that public policy for young people remained concerned with the “acute anxieties of adolescence” and was failing to address what I depicted as the “emerging chronic crisis of young adulthood”. That was a generation ago, and the current generation is more seriously afflicted by that crisis in myriad ways that could never have been anticipated. It is the stuff of a great deal of political, journalistic and academic debate – how will the young respond to “The Crisis”, and how should public institutions and political decisions react?

At a recent conference organised by the Youth Partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission, exploring a range of issues and the challenges these may present for young people by 2020, one participant suggested that far too few young people in Europe were even being allowed to “sniff” a range of experiences and opportunities that might enhance their personal futures and contribute to more positive futures for their families, communities, regions, nations and Europe itself. On myriad fronts, the “glue” that produces tolerance and understanding, social cohesion, social inclusion and improved life chances needs both to be strengthened and extended.

This paper considers the context in which the conference took place, the reflections and deliberations at the event itself, and the broad themes that represent the essential core for youth policy development in Europe (and indeed beyond) as 2020 approaches.

## **THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT**

It is impossible to consider the contemporary social condition of young people in Europe without confronting, at its very epicentre, the levels of youth unemployment. The shocks of the “one in five” that have routinely challenged policy making around labour market insertion, vocational training and youth support have been replaced with scenarios where half or even more of young people are excluded from the labour market. There are, of course, some exceptions (Germany and Austria are still doing reasonably well in holding their levels of youth unemployment at under 10%) and Greece and Spain (both well over 50%) are extreme cases, but, as politicians are prone to say, there is no room for complacency. Equally, however, there is also no reason for panic or fear: levels of social unrest – notwithstanding some street protests and the Occupy movement – that might have been reasonably anticipated in such circumstances have not (yet?) materialised. The responses of the young to this particular consequence of austerity have been surprisingly muted and unsurprisingly varied (see Williamson 2013).

European leaders may make a huge issue of the need to develop a “knowledge-based” economy but, from young people’s perspective, engagement with education and learning, and the striving for accreditation and qualifications has not been matched with positions in the labour market commensurate with those achievements. This has often produced despondency and demoralisation in the young, who sense a breach of the “generational contract” that is tantamount to what has been depicted as betrayal: promises made to the younger generation have not been honoured. For this, and other reasons, there is growing evidence of alienation from and mistrust of mainstream politics and of the politicians who peddle it.

Yet there has been relatively little indication that this has been replaced by new, alternative democratic politics or stronger affiliation to the political extremes. People will, of course, point to the tragic events visited on young people in Norway by Anders Behring Breivik and his proclaimed rationale of seeking to defend a Christian Europe from an invasion of Islam and the “infidel”. People will draw attention, in contrast, to terrorist attacks by young Muslims in Spain and England. And others will note the rise in popularity of right-wing political parties in countries as diverse as Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands and Greece. But, though none of this should be dismissed as matters of no concern, there has been no dramatic surge of young people engaged in these ways.

Instead, they are trying to get on with their lives. The knock-on effects of precarious employment opportunities have been illustrated in the areas of family formation and housing stability. Young people are delaying having their own children, are struggling to establish independent living and are generally finding their transitions to autonomy obstructed, protracted and unpredictable. It would be foolish to proclaim, as some youth organisations sometimes tend to do, that all young people

are excluded. This is clearly not so. Some, through good fortune, patronage, family background, social networks, particular achievements and personal determination, are still doing reasonably fine, but many more – a substantial minority now, if not a marginal majority – are facing levels of exclusion that had never been anticipated. This has potential consequences for individuals in terms of despondency and perhaps despair, for societies in relation to deviance and cohesion, and for democracy in terms of commitment and legitimacy. It may be grand rhetoric but that does not devalue the message when it is said “we fail the young at our peril”.

## **TRANSFORMATIVE LEGACIES NEED TRANSFORMATIVE ACTIONS – THE BIG ISSUES OF OUR TIME**

The Budapest conference was not charged with pinning down precise policy objectives. Indeed, that was what it was not permitted to do. Instead, it basked in the luxury of “scanning the horizons”, to detect and discuss trends and challenges reaching beyond the current moment and looking towards and beyond 2020 – a year, we were told, that may seem just hours away for a demographer who looks perhaps one hundred years ahead but feels close enough to herald almost imminent Armageddon for the ecologist.

The youth field has a dreadful tendency to look inwards, navel-gazing in the vernacular, at the expense of hanging its many issues on one of the pegs representing the big issues of our time. Hence the idea that the conference should be opened by a series of “provocations” (or inspirations, depending on one’s point of view) on some of those big issues of our time: demography, ecology, economy, technology, democracy and values. The first evening was spent with participants testing their youth knowledge and experience against the frameworks of those contributions.

An official report has been produced on the conference (Kristiansen 2013), and this details the process and discussion of the event. Here some selected extracts (in italics) will be presented, together with supplementary material recorded by the author.

One of the key messages from the provocation on demography was that even if Europe draws on all its existing human resources in response to its multiple needs, massive immigration from outside of Europe will be needed to maintain stability and ensure growth. With an ageing population, the prolongation of youth, the retirement age and its related pensions challenge, “much more bold thinking is needed” requiring concomitant political drive and determination. And although a much more immediate time frame was considered in the provocation on ecology, a very similar conclusion was reached. While, for the longer term (if there is one), environmental conscientiousness and accountability need to be embedded as an integral part of the education of young people, it was also asserted that sustainable development “requires a major shift in the way we think”. On a rather different tack and track, the provocation on economy focused on the unprecedented levels of youth unemployment in Europe and especially the plight of the 14 million young people who are described as NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training), which is associated with high social and economic costs. Indeed, the speaker emphasised the need to “avoid sowing the seeds of disengagement and disillusionment”. Education, of course, is often considered to be the measure that can both

prevent disengagement and promote re-engagement but the prospective role of new information and communication technologies in learning and development is contested and controversial. According to the provocation on technology, there are many grounds for optimism:

It facilitates personalised learning; it enables learners to learn anywhere and anytime; it allows immediate feedback and formative assessment; it makes it possible to reach a wider community of learners; it provides opportunities for seamless learning across a range of devices; it encourages collaborative and project-based learning; it expands the reach and equity of education; it favours situated learning; it minimises educational disruption in conflict and disaster areas; it assists with the integration of learners with disabilities; and it can improve the administration as well as the cost-effectiveness of education and training.

The list of positive possibilities is seemingly endless. Yet however dramatic the paradigm shift in learning that may arise from technological innovation, the fact remains that “education is a social process” requiring human interaction and facilitation.

The provocation on democracy (reported in full in this journal – see the article by Muxel) suggested that young people’s reaction to politicians and policy is composed of mistrust, disgust and boredom as the main ingredients, but that they still express political commitment through social media and place value on such issues as pragmatism, efficiency and individualisation. It was noted that “abstention from voting could be a sign of political vitality”. Past transformations in the political landscape have to be matched by further transformations today and tomorrow, through constructive and not just reactive dialogue between young people and government.

A final, rather more philosophical, provocation on values noted the place of children as natural and active philosophers but that “forming and sustaining values is a mixed business”. Perhaps they should be consistently held, but values are contingent on environment and context and “acting according to your values is not always easy”; moreover:

... we should be aware of the different values that may underlie concepts that we use when trying to interact with people from other backgrounds than ourselves – we therefore cannot take consensus for granted, even though we use the same words.

As an archetypical case in point, the concept of “Europe” carries very different value connotations.

## **SOME KEY CHALLENGES IN YOUTH POLICY DOMAINS**

These six provocations were carried forward, after specific interrogation by participants, into a full day’s discussion within ten thematic working groups, reflecting key issues within the youth field: learning, work, health, inclusion, citizenship and participation, identity and lifestyles, diversity and solidarity, mobility, housing and family, and crime and justice. The four slots in the day were given over to different emphases, beginning with a review of existing knowledge, followed by perspectives from different countries, then the presentation of interesting and instructive case