European POLICYBRIEF

PROMISE

PROMOTING YOUTH INVOLVEMENT AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Trusting All Youth to Build a Better Europe

NOVEMBER 2018

INTRODUCTION

Europe displays extensive socioeconomic contrasts: it includes poorer states which recently emerged from communism, fascist dictatorships and/or civil wars, as well as wealthier countries with a GDP per capita ranking among the highest in the world. Despite these remaining discrepancies, young people across Europe are facing common trends that allow us to consider "European youth" as a relevant category.

"Youth" is a national policy area and the EU can only act by supporting Member States to coordinate their national policies, or by supplementing them. With the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, Member States have a renewed frame to cooperate in the field of youth. The Strategy proposes to focus three key areas: Engage, Connect and Empower. With this Strategy, the Member States have a tool to build effective national social investment strategies that enable successful youth transitions for all. The new Youth Dialogue is a core element of the Strategy which encourages the Member States to establish effective outreach structures to recognise diversity in social capital and opportunities, and to make all young people's voices heard.[1]

PROMISE explored the ways young people with a history of stigmatisation or conflict participate in society. The focus was on the different ways they engage with social, environmental and political issues, and how they create opportunities for social change. The following recommendations on Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement in Europe are based on ethnographic case studies with young people and quantitative research using the European Value Survey and other secondary data sources.

Our results show that to support the development and implementation of policies to promote youth involvement and social engagement, European countries need a variety of measures. Member States need effective policies to encompass youth support in all areas (educational, employment, social) to make all voices heard, especially those of young people facing multiple life challenges. Therefore, they should:

- *Recognise diverse life paths of young people*
- *Enhance the recognition and support of youth-led initiatives*
- *Promote support structures for young people*
- *Create safe (urban) spaces for youth*

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[1] European Commission (2018) EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, p.4

1. RECOGNISE DIVERSE LIFE PATHS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

The life paths of young people vary enormously[2]. The direction of a young person's life is less a matter of individual choice, and more something that is shaped by a complex set of contexts and socio-demographic factors (*ibid*). A key concern of the PROMISE project has been to what extent young people are able to make choices and steer their life course. Many of the young people who participated in PROMISE´s research report a significant lack of freedom of choice in their own life path:

> *"I always had a million things to think about while I was growing up because we had to face a lot of problems. My mum separating from my dad because of his drug addiction and stuff like that... To take my mind off things all I wanted to do was go out and have fun."* (**Italy**, <u>Artistic Start-Ups</u>)

Responsibilities towards family and friends, the need to balance little money with educational aspirations as well as the will to change the surrounding society put youth under constraints. The will to participate in society is very often the first thing to drop in importance, even though it is a key to facilitating change in other realms of the young people's lives.

> The case study on <u>young mothers</u> as caregivers **(Finland)** found that **young people often have multiple family-related care responsibilities**; not only as mothers but also towards other people they were close to, such as parents, a partner's child, or a friend. These care responsibilities have a concrete influence on their abilities to reconcile other domains of life (e.g. education, active citizenship) with care responsibilities.

But projects that are accessible and which young people take ownership of can change things:

> The **Italian** <u>Artistic Start-Ups</u> case study found that the years spent in street gangs lead young people to develop a strong sense of belonging that can be transferred to the whole local community when the young people are free to maintain the values and habits they know best. Through the medium of art, the young people learned to **use their street origin as an asset**, something they share with the younger generations they wish to involve in their arts projects. By so doing, **the stigma of marginality becomes a strength by which they aim for change in society**.

> *Member states need to ensure that services and projects for youth <u>take into account the diverse life paths of young people</u> and not presuppose youth as a phase of freedom from responsibilities, financial constraints or other pressures.*
>
> *This needs to be realised by providing <u>free, flexible and life-world oriented services and projects</u> to young people such as the Artistic Naples Project. Only then can the participation of all youth in society, as aimed for in the new EU Youth Strategy[3], be realised.*

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[2] Schwanitz, Kathrin (2017). The transition to adulthood and pathways out of the parental home: A cross-national analysis. Advances in Life Course Research 32, 21-34.
[3] Cf. European Commission (2018) EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, p.3

2. ENHANCE THE RECOGNITION AND SUPPORT OF YOUTH-LED INITIATIVES

PROMISE's case studies show that young people in conflict have very different levels of agency. While some struggle with the challenges they are facing that leave little space for social engagement, other conflicted youth all over Europe are remarkably adept at organizing themselves in squatted homes, self-organised youth centres, organized fan groups etc.

These initiatives not only show the resources many young people do have to lead self-determined lives, but are examples of the ways in which young people acquire life skills, gain new experiences and learn things they deem useful…

> *"Since I've been participating here[4], I've learned a lot about construction, at the political level as well, including the legislative aspect, regulations, because there are many problems with licensing issues; and then also on a personal level."* (Self-Building, **Spain**)

… and can also be a starting point for more formal involvement:

> *"NIOT[5] was also an impulse, a motivation for me to start to be more active, and through NIOT I got to an international group Radicalisation Awareness Network and its programme RAN YOUNG, which wants to create a platform, to share information among young people from Europe that relates to fighting against extremism and de-radicalisation."* (NIOT, **Slovakia**)

However, skills acquired in youth-led activities are often not recognised by wider society, and stigma and conflict stand in the way of young people unfolding their full potential of social engagement:

> *"We had a big group something like 6-7 years ago (…). We went to the council to get that lake sorted –to clean it up. We did all the work, got the plan on the paper in a really detailed way and everything, (…) and so we presented it to them. And they just rejected it. They said they have other priorities....That really threw us, we were so ready –but they just rejected it. It was one of the reasons for bitterness of the young people towards the municipality."* (Ex-Offenders, **Estonia**)

The **UK** case study on 'risky' youth found that situations of conflict should be seen as chances whereby **relationships with authority may be recast from conflictual to positive**. This can only happen where young people feel they **have been listened to and supported with the intention of channelling conflict into positive change and action**.

Greater appreciation of the effort of youth-led initiatives and the social and cultural resources gained is needed. Self-organised groups with bottom-up approaches need to be treated equally to formal, established youth groups; therefore we call on Member States to:

- *Listen to ideas & concerns of all young people through a variety of participatory political formats at all political levels that consider diverse life paths and are accessible to all youth*
- *Provide easy-to-access funding opportunities for informal youth-led activities, such as now realised with the solidarity projects within the EU Solidarity Corps, and raise awareness of these*
- *Make the new Youth Dialogue, a core element of the Youth Strategy[6], an effective outreach tool to recognise diversity in social capital and opportunities, and to make all young people's voices heard.*

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[4] The young person speaking here is one of 23 young people from 6 different collectives that one of the Spanish case studies focussed on: 2 self-construction initiatives for collective equipment; a masovería group that has carried out the restoration of an urban dwelling while also participating in the development of an urban garden and another masovería group focused on restoration objectives in a rural environment; a group of young female architects involved in alternative forms of construction that include a wide range of techniques, from bio-construction to the recovery of several craft practices (cf.WP6, p.393).

[5] Not in Our Town (NIOT) grassroots movement in the Slovak city of Banská Bystrica that originated as a protest movement against the results of regional elections in 2013 when a Neo-Nazi governor was democratically elected.
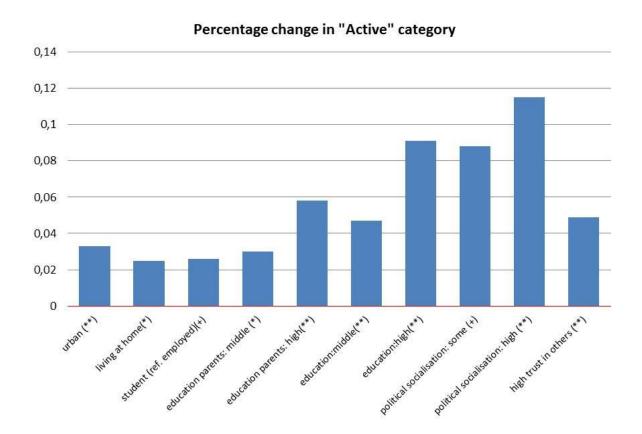
[6] Cf. European Commission (2018) EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, p.4

3. PROMOTE SUPPORT STRUCTURES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

All case studies conducted under the umbrella of PROMISE find that positive and supportive relationships are crucial for young people to develop. These can be relationships with family, peers or other trustworthy people such as youth workers or teachers.

The secondary analysis of quantitative data gathered for PROMISE, in line with findings from previous qualitative studies, indicates that families significantly influence the social and political engagement of their children (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Micro-level indicators of engagement profiles.[7]

Percentage change in "Active" category

Factors such as political socialisation and parental educational background influence the young people – positively or negatively. However, the higher a young person's trust in other people, the more likely he or she will be socially engaged – irrespective of the family background and socio-economic resources.

Continuing youth work can promote young people's social and political engagement by using positive relationships as bridges to promote trust in society, as the following young person illustrates:

> *"It helped me to be here, in this environment of young people meeting up, having fun, playing... it is something that moves you and makes you get more involved with people around you and makes you think differently too: to lose fear, to have confidence with people, to relate to others... And this learning will be useful later on in your professional career."* (NoNEETs, **Spain**)

This links in well with the new EU Youth Strategy's goal of supporting youth empowerment through recognition of youth work as a prerequisite for fostering youth participation in democratic life,[8] and is also illustrated in the case studies:

> The **Portuguese** case study focusing on youth in so-called second chance education emphasises that encouraging the agency and self-determination of young people with risk and deviance pathways is a key aspect to their positive social involvement. Non- and informal education are especially well suited to provide this encouragement:

> *"They help us a lot. If I have to talk, if I have to vent, you can go to them. They give advice; it's like a second mother and a second father, basically. I feel good, it's different. The warmth, the cosiness, the trust, is completely different."* (Young People with Paths of Psychological Risk, **Portugal**)

However, in many countries across the EU, as the new EU Youth Strategy points out[9], youth work is not recognised as a profession and/or receives little financial assistance[10].

Therefore <u>we call on the Member States to provide consistent, reliable structures in non-formal and informal education</u>, such as:

- *reliable long-term funding of youth work and services and*
- *qualified training opportunities for youth workers in all EU Member States*

to ensure that youth workers can reach their professional aspirations of <u>promoting young people's trust in others and the society as a whole.</u>

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[8] Cf. European Commission (2018) EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, p.3
[9] Cf. European Commission (2018) EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, p.7
[10] Cf. European Commission (2014) Working with young people: the value of youth work in the EU.

4. CREATE SAFE (URBAN) SPACES FOR YOUTH

Urban areas have always had a great appeal for young people. They bring together a vast amount of people with different cultures, religions, value systems, jobs etc. However, cities are often very restricted when it comes to distributing space to different groups. **Without any places to explore different views, ways of life and ideas, however, prospects for young people can be dire**:

> One case study from **Italy** indicates that the young people who get involved in illegal activities do so because they feel they have no alternative options. **Criminality is the only opportunity** for them to engage successfully in activities and acquire a recognised social role in the local community. The lack of social and leisure opportunities in the neighbourhood, combined with the harsh family and economic situations of many of them, leads the young people to have **no prospect of an alternative life**.

> In **Finland**, a young person interviewed was asked if he goes out, perhaps to a pub, at which point he exclaimed: "*To a pub... [laughs a little] We are poor. We go outside, we go and buy something to eat from a grocery store if we want to. And then, now that it's summer again, we go outside. In autumn we stayed out for quite a long time. We stopped doing that two weeks before it snowed for the first time because it was so cold.*" (Circus Group, Finland)

In packed cities, young people need safe spaces where they can develop new prospects for their future, try out identities and experience their own efficacy in a safe environment, with the support of professional youth workers where needed. But also in rural areas young people reported facing exclusion and have difficulties finding spaces to express themselves in, especially if they want to be independent of traditional rural structures and customs[11].

Therefore, safe spaces should be developed to respond to these needs. The following examples identify some of the features of youth spaces:

> The research conducted with young people in **Finland** (mentioned above) found that what was essential for the young people's sense of belonging to the youth cultural and community centre was the fact that it was a **free leisure space** with no need to pay fees or to buy anything to gain access. Many voiced the need for more open urban spaces **for young adults over the age of 18**. This age group (18-29) often becomes invisible in municipal youth work, where most activities are planned for preteens and teenagers.

> One of the **Spanish** case studies came to a similar result. There findings show that although young people meet in many different premises (formal and informal/private and public), the young people interviewed agree on **the importance of having stable and equipped facilities** where they can meet, organise and participate in activities.

Member States must encourage regions to finance safe spaces for young people through a variety of measures, such as supporting and funding youth-led spaces, funding outreach projects and innovative approaches of more traditional youth centres and support services as well as encouraging participative youth work for a wide age range to cater for the diverse life paths of young people.

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[11] This was especially the case in the case study on rural youth in **Estonia**

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

This policy brief is based on National Policy Briefs linked to twenty-two ethnographic case studies conducted across ten European countries, and quantitative research related to the analysis of the European Values Survey and other secondary data analysis (EVS 2008-2010. Analyses of political interest and activism activities with ESS 2016-2017[12]).

The case studies involved participatory research with young people in conflict with authority as part of a participatory research strategy. In each country, they included up to a year of participant observation, a series of in-depth interviews with young people, and a range of participatory arts-based methods.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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[12] Cf. The European Values and Participation Report, WP4: http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/en/quantitative-outputs/

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BUDGET	EU contribution: 2 500 000 €.
WEBSITE	http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/en/home-page/
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REFERENCES / FURTHER READING

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