

What does the EU Mean to Young People?

By Ulla Grøn

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Europe today is more complex than earlier, when friends and enemies were more easily defined. The first nearly 50 years of the EU have meant great cohesive force in exactly those areas that are highly valued by young people – work, education, peace and security. So isn't the EU doing alright? Hasn't the situation improved considerably since 1957 when the Treaty of Rome was signed?

Yes – is my personal answer. To think that the devastated, bomb-torn and divided Europe would come so far in 50 years. So far that today the populations are even asked in what direction they wish for the EU to develop. A referendum is always risky business – specifics may turn the result overnight. But the EU has developed from being primarily a trade agreement on coal and steel supplies into being a democratic forum in which it is actually possible to pose the same question across borders – and where a no vote is handled democratically without the project failing consequently.

The present 'period of reflection' does not mean that the EU has been put back to square one, but that the union's speed of development is moving closer to the wish of the populations. Earlier there has been a tendency that the populations in general have felt the development to be too rapid.

Thus, there is a possibility – right now – to put it straight: to match the wish of the populations (youth as well as elderly) to get more involved – and the courage of the EU project to give them the necessary space.

Young People are more Positive

Looking at the surveys done by the communications office of the European Commission (cf. fact box), it is clear that: 1) young people in general are more positive toward the European project than the populations in general; 2) young people value areas that are close to their everyday life (e.g. travelling and educational options, fighting unemployment) more highly than the populations in general (who value e.g. security and defence policy very highly). But both surveys clearly show that the populations would like to get closer to EU, in the sense of gaining more influence.

The elderly part of the European populations have learned for themselves what it means to live in a war-damaged part of the world, or they have had the story told by close relatives – a story of a Europe that underwent both World War and Cold War. Their vision of Europe is typically either a 'Europe of Peace' or a regression to a 'Europe of Nation States'.

Young People's (EU-citizens aged 15-24) perception of the EU:

The youth has also witnessed war, but for the most part at a distance, through the media – the disintegration of Yugoslavia; Iraq; Afghanistan; international terror. But they have also experienced the fall of the Wall, the internet and globalisation.

- 56 % of the young people have a positive perception of the European Union
 - 62 % believe that EU first and foremost means freedom of travelling, studying and working
 - and that the three most urgent areas for the EU to engage in are:
 - 1) fighting unemployment
 - 2) fighting poverty and social inequality
 - 3) maintaining peace and security in Europe.
- ... but only 39 % (i.e. less than 4 out of 10) feel that their voice has any weight in the EU.

The press and communications office of the European Commission, December 2005

Hence, there may be different motives for committing to the European project. But in what ways has the project changed? What is today's challenge?

I am going to point out just one element – identity construction.

Travelling the Culture of Europe

In 1848, N.F.S. Grundtvig wrote, "He belongs to a people who reckons himself among it". Árpád Göncz, President of Hungary 1990-2000, said, "Hungarian is anyone who chooses to be Hungarian". Let me extend these statements and assert that "European is anyone who chooses to be European."

Rather than 'just' define yourself as a Dane, you can define yourself as a Jutlander, a Scandinavian or a European. Or all three of them if you feel for it. And this is exactly the point – to feel for it, or to reckon yourself among it. This is a central part of the challenge EU is facing: the individual citizen feeling European AND

Jutlandish/Danish or Catalan/Spanish. In other words, identity and commitment seems to be one of the greatest challenges for the young individual and for the EU in the years to come.

The challenge for the young person is to pack the backpack and pursue the desire to explore Europe by working, studying or experiencing. To try out other ways of life and regard one's own in a fresh light. To learn and absorb, to expand one's understanding of difference and diversity – and subsequently make use of the new knowledge.

The challenge for EU is to stimulate young people's wanderlust and eagerness to study and work elsewhere than in the familiar national environments. To open up possibilities for growing a cross-national, or European, sense of community.

The Populations' Perception of the EU:

- EU support is decreasing (from 54 to 50 %), but the populations of Europe are generally positive toward the idea of a European constitution (63 %)
- the populations are sceptical toward further enlargement, but positive toward security and defence policy and joint foreign policy
- it is a thought-provoking fact that a mere 26 % of the European populations feel involved or committed to European affairs, and no less than 47 % express a wish to gain more influence.

The press and communications office of the European Commission, December 2005

Travel!

Young people's immediate attention to Europe as a way of travelling, studying and working is a constructive point of departure. For if they want these opportunities to exist in future, they must keep dealing with the present problems, such as free movement of labour, language policy and social integration across borders. Ideally, young people's search for identity and curiosity for life will result in active citizenship and in this way firmly anchor and materialise the visions of EU. So, beloved young people – travel! Experience, listen and learn... Be inspired and gain knowledge of the changes as well as the anchoring which is needed.

Study Questions:

- 1) Has the European project been a 'tremendous success'?
- 2) What comprises your identity? Why?
- 3) What does the elusive concept of identity mean to a concrete project such as the adoption of the EU constitution?
- 4) If you choose to travel in Europe, would you like to study, work – or first and foremost experience? And what would you expect to gain from it?
- 5) Would you feel more/less European/Danish/Jutlandish after a cultural travel?