

What's politics
got to do with it?

**European youth work
programmes and the
development of critical
youth citizenship**

Author:
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European youth work programmes and the development of critical youth citizenship – Summary –

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This is the summary of a longer discussion paper with the same title that considers the position and challenges of working on 'the political' in and through European youth work programmes. It is the result of a series of structured interactions with practitioners actively using or implementing European youth work programmes as promoted by European institutions, especially the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission. The motivation for taking this journey, and for deciding along the way that the paper should be a key output of the process, comes from a longer period of less structured reflection on the part of stakeholders in the field on the basis of the needs they perceive in the community of practice.

The paper is an attempt to describe and understand the complex of issues and debates surrounding the question of 'the political' in European youth work. It seeks to provide arguments for why European youth work needs to pay more explicit attention to the politically sensitive issues of the current time. It also seeks to encourage recognition among members of the European youth work community of practice that a principled stance on current political and social developments in Europe, as they affect young people, civil society, democracy and European cooperation and integration, is an existential necessity and not just a matter of methodological nuance.

The full paper is available [here](#).

For some years now, European youth work has been characterised by ‘creeping depoliticisation’. Those active in European youth work programmes report that the idea of ‘the political’ can be experienced as intimidating or even inappropriate and is often misinterpreted as indoctrination. Paradoxically, youth workers and youth leaders will refer to their work using the terms citizenship education, human rights education or global education, yet express discomfort if their work is termed political. Many demonstrate a lack of confidence when asked to work with such a perspective with young people.

Increasingly, the work of civil society organisations (including work conducted by youth organisations and youth work providers) that is interpreted as political is associated with negative consequences for the individuals involved and/or the organisations. The sustainability of youth work focusing on socially progressive and human rights-related issues, groups, power dynamics or change is increasingly under threat. It is becoming increasingly difficult to address any issue deemed sensitive and controversial by the powers that be across Europe and the world in educational contexts, both formal and non-formal. Doing so can result in your organisation being excluded from funding, you yourself being accused of overstepping your mandate as an educator or people in positions of authority relating to the young people you work with withdrawing their trust. This is a political issue in and of itself, but acknowledging the fact that the space for civil society to act as a watchdog and as a check and balance for state power is closing has been rather slow in coming to the institutional landscape associated with European youth work.¹ The power dynamics and the very high stakes involved in youth workers and youth leaders supporting young people's civic, political and social engagement remain low on the policy agenda. And yet, the idea that youth work should contribute to active citizenship, participation and the civic and political education of young people around Europe is the upshot of many European declarations, policy documents and programmes.

Understandably then, members of the European youth work community of practice ask what the political dimension of European youth work is, why they need to think about it and work on it and how they are supposed to do this in their day-to-day practice with young people in European projects.

1 Alex Farrow for the SALTO Participation and Information Resource Centre, SALTO Think Tank on Youth
Participation: Closer to the edge of participation and activism, 2018.
Online at: https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3830/Raport_210x210mm_sm.pdf.
See also [https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/shrinking-space%\\$%2240721995%22:\[2\]](https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/shrinking-space%$%2240721995%22:[2]).

The paper is an attempt to describe and understand the complex of issues and debates surrounding the question of ‘the political’ in European youth work. It seeks to provide arguments for why European youth work needs to pay more explicit attention to the politically sensitive issues of the current time. It also seeks to encourage recognition among members of the European youth work community of practice that a principled stance on current political and social developments in Europe, as they affect young people, civil society, democracy and European cooperation and integration, is an existential necessity and not just a matter of methodological nuance.

Ours is an open-ended reflection around the questions that have preoccupied parts of the European youth work community of practice for some time and which have been identified through both structured and less structured debates in the youth work field. These questions include:

- _ What is the context in which European youth work functions today? How does this impact the ways in which different stakeholders in the European youth (work) sector interpret its purposes?
- _ Why is the idea that European youth work might be political the subject of controversy?
- _ How does the political actually manifest itself in contemporary European youth work?
- _ What kind of youth work would be adequate for today’s European realities, including the changed nature of young people’s participation, the increasing diversity of European societies and the challenges of inclusion?
- _ Are the expectations that political decision-makers place on European youth work as outlined in recent political statements realistic and appropriate? How can European youth work deliver on these? What is the political ‘potential’ of European youth work?
- _ What are the policy, programme and pedagogy implications of the debate on the political dimension of European youth work?

A number of key terms recur in the paper and should be clarified before presenting the argument.

First, *European youth work* should be understood in a broad sense, as that work with young people (mainly of an educational nature) that a) considers ‘Europe’ or ‘European issues’ as a key framing consideration or context, and/or b) uses funding from European youth work programmes or is organised centrally by one of the European youth work support institutions, and/or c) takes place between different countries in Europe (international) or in one country in Europe (national with a European dimension), and/or d) is conducted by organisations whose capacity has been built by European youth work programmes. In our understanding, any combination of at least two of these criteria would qualify a youth work project as European youth work.

Second, the *European youth work community of practice* should be understood as being made up of all actors and stakeholders who consider themselves part of the European youth work sector, including, among others, youth leaders, project carriers, youth organisations, ministries responsible for youth and civil servants responsible for youth policy, European institutions and their programmes of youth work support, National Agencies of the Erasmus+ and other youth-relevant education and mobility programmes, multipliers and youth activists associated with the institutional programmes, trainers and their representative associations or the pools they form and even young people themselves.

Third, *European youth work programmes*, as referred to here, are those European-level policies and programmes that have been put in place through European cooperation and that are explicitly aimed at supporting youth work and policy with a European dimension. Although the EU programmes are financially better endowed and the most visible among these support programmes, the Council of Europe and organisations like the OECD and UNESCO, also have dedicated youth support programmes. Several private philanthropic organisations also have programmes of support for youth work that are based on European principles and whose intention it is to promote European values. Needless to say, the landscape is quite diverse.

Fourth, *policy, politics and the political system* need to be distinguished, even though they are intimately bound to each other, and the terms policy and politics are de facto the same in many languages. Policy should be understood as referring to the products of political decision-making by politicians and elected representatives. Politics should be understood as the process through which political decision-making takes place, and includes competition between those occupying or vying for positions of power. The political system, or polity, refers to political structures and their workings in states, in Europe and in institutions or organisations.

Six dilemmas

For this reflection, we begin with the dilemmas and, therefore, the challenges with which the community of practice is confronted when thinking about and addressing the idea of the political in youth work, as they are known from both the debates taking place and the limited research available. Six main groups of considerations come to the fore, as follows:

1. Project Europe: Although a lot of European-level youth organisations are doing explicitly political work with a European orientation, the idea of Europe, as an aspirational project to advance human rights, the rule of law and democracy, has come to be increasingly invisible in European youth work, and this at a time when the very notion of Europe as a vehicle for inclusion and the pursuit of justice is being challenged from within and without. If at one time, the so-called European dimension was one of the main criteria of the basis on which funding was made available to youth work (especially by the EU programmes), the past 15 years has seen the focus shift towards different priorities: employability, personal development, anti-radicalisation and, most recently, solidarity. While this is hardly surprising given the effects of the economic crises on young people's life chances, the very serious return of mass youth unemployment and the increasing sense of young people falling prey to radical ideologies, these developments have completely changed the direction of travel of the European youth work theory of change. The mantra of European political leaders, that young people are a driving force for social change in Europe and in European integration, no longer stands up to the reality test. Although concern regarding the rise of national-populist movements, which have been appropriating the notion of European values and European identity with their divisive politics, and the obvious disillusionment and disenfranchisement of younger generations from (European) politics, are fuelling interest in youth work as a vehicle for active citizenship education, there remains far too little space in European youth work, and for the organisations that pursue European political and civic education with young people, to explore new, visionary and progressive narratives on European values, European identity and how these should influence European integration.

2. Purpose: European youth work is grounded in a very clearly articulated consensus about its normative objectives, in other words about what it is for. These are laid out in an ever-larger number of political declarations negotiated by European states (and to some extent with civil society) in the context of European cooperation in the youth field regarding the principles and values that should define how European youth work actually works and especially the outcomes it should pursue. These documents include everything from the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Union treaties, to the Erasmus+ regulations, statutes of institutions like the European Youth Foundation and specific political documents like European Council conclusions, Council of Europe recommendations and recent youth work-specific declarations like those from the two European Youth Work Conventions.²

The upshot of these documents is that European youth work is a form of value education and should contribute to the development of ‘critical Europe awareness’ and active democratic citizenship among young people. In other words, European youth work should contribute to the emergence of a sense of responsibility for what happens in, around and because of Europe, including awareness that European democracy is a privilege and needs to be constantly renewed, rather than a European identity based on cultural, folkish or racialising understandings of who is European.³ Although some youth organisations and youth work projects are pursuing such aims, this normative basis of European youth work is increasingly absent from the structural frameworks regulating, funding and providing capacity development support for youth workers and youth leaders conducting youth work, from the local to the European level.

3. Political & social change: ‘Change’ is also a key dilemma for European youth work. Political and programmatic declarations regarding European youth work regularly conflate the personal efficacy benefits young people gain from participation with social change. Yet, it cannot be taken for granted that individual learning gained during youth work activities leads to organisational efficacy benefits, policy change or ultimately to value change in society. There is simply too little empirical evidence for it to be possible

2 https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-2803/2010_Declaration_European_youth_work_convention_en.pdf; <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/eywc-website-declaration>.

3 Howard Williamson, Mapping and scanning the horizons for European youth work in the 21st century. Towards the 2nd European Youth Work Convention, 2015. Online at: https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262187/FINDING+COMMON+GROUND_Final+with+poster.pdf/91d8f10d-7568-46f3-a36e-96bf716419be.

to draw this conclusion. Being young is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for active engagement in socio-political causes or for making social change.⁴ A further dilemma here relates to the direction of change: the question of ‘change to what?’ Certainly, the last years have seen a marked closing of the space for civil society to act as a platform for consensus-building around politically sensitive issues, which is one of its key functions for a healthy democracy. Users of European and other programmes providing project support report that funding opportunities for current ‘political’ issues are becoming ever slimmer. Institutional funding for the political education of young people has all but disappeared, even where it previously existed.

4. Participation: The extent and quality of young people’s participation are a mainstay of European youth work and youth policy. Youth programmes are lauded as ‘schools of democracy’ for enabling civic awareness and competence that initiates young people into active citizenship through their lives or into the vocation of political office and public service. And yet, research shows that young people are increasingly disenfranchised from mainstream political participation and, therefore, power. The current generation of young people are the least convinced generation that democracy is the best system of government and representation. There has been a values shift among young people towards so-called ‘new power’ values, which emphasise informal, short-term, immediate and transparent forms of involvement that focus on doing, making and collaborating, rather than on lifelong affiliation, formal governance and structures of representation, which they feel have let them down and do not represent their interests.⁵ Despite this, the question of ‘power’ – who has it, who does not, what it means for the life chances of individuals and whole communities and countries, etc. – has not been on the agenda of European youth work for a significant period of time. The power dynamics (i.e. the politics) that determine the experiences young people have in their lives are hardly the subject of European youth work projects, and many such power asymmetries are even being replicated in the context of face-to-face activities. European youth work has been comparatively slow to understand the implications of intersectionality, inclusiveness, restorative justice, de-colonisation and gender sensitivity and to adapt its practice appropriately.

4 <https://www.youthforum.org/shadow-report-mid-term-evaluation-erasmus-youth-chapter>.

5 <https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/>.

5. Power and agency: European youth work is certainly seen as a contribution to the ‘agency’ of young people, in that it addresses their competence development, including competencies for civic engagement. Closely related to the dilemma presented by the ‘change orientation’ of youth work, is that its mobilisational power is increasingly challenged. Furthermore, the level of agency that can be expected from young people that have taken part in European youth work projects, and even of those youth work projects themselves, is often significantly overestimated by policymakers and funders. One concrete result of European youth work not addressing power and power relations sufficiently is that there is an inherent contradiction between what it tells young people they should be able to achieve and what is actually possible for them to achieve. Too often, young people that have been involved in European youth work find themselves in a situation of powerlessness in the face of the very injustices they hoped to be able to change through their voluntary engagement and motivation: their hopes dashed as reality bites. On the one hand, many young people are involved in very short-term youth work projects, and ‘new power values’ mean that, while young people are likely to participate in multiple activities, it is increasingly difficult to keep them involved for longer periods of time. On the other hand, practitioners admit that even in longer-term projects, far too little attention is given to how to put learning in the context of European youth work into practice, how to build coalitions of the willing around projects, how to advocate for support from people with power to deliver change without selling your soul and how to work in a political system, because it is politics that determines the chances of success. This is a matter not only of available funding streams and priorities, but also of the competence and confidence of the youth workers and youth leaders supporting European youth work projects, i.e. the practitioners of face-to-face youth work. There is too little opportunity and support for youth workers and youth leaders to access experience and almost no specialised training exists for working on the political. Necessarily, youth workers and leaders are also concerned with instrumentalisation and how to maintain the legitimacy and viability of their work if they explicitly engage with issues deemed political.

6. Pedagogy: Given the above considerations, a key question for any reflection on European youth work has to be how the methodological practice, the pedagogy in use in European youth work, is conceptualised as political or not by those who work with it and by those who promote it. Currently, it has become common for European youth work to be understood more in terms of learning mobility than in terms of political or

civic education, and this has had a significant impact on the way in which the pedagogy in use is conceptualised.⁶ Although no systematic mapping of the pedagogical practice in use in European youth work has been conducted, there is a large body of quality practice literature that gives us clues to the consensus of the community of practice on its core principles. These include manuals on human rights education, anti-racist activism, countering hate speech and gender-based violence and inclusion and diversity, to mention only the most prominent. A cursory analysis of this literature reveals two divergent approaches to operationalising the ‘political’. The first considers education of any kind a political act and takes a critical, reflexive and inherently democratic approach. A youth worker is a facilitator of a process in which the young people have the power and make the relevant decisions that influence the course of their participation in the project. The very point of the project is the democratic process and the experience of democracy that young people gain, rather than any specified learning outcome (civic or otherwise). The second approach applies established methodologies (e.g. education for democratic citizenship, human rights education) for a specific learning objective without there necessarily being a clear justificatory argument or educational rationale for why this methodology is appropriate, other than for entertainment value. In this approach, young people are often not more than consumers of youth work experiences, and although they may learn something about human rights or about democratic citizenship, they have little or no chance to experience it. When asked, youth workers and youth leaders said that their projects appear to be most effective for engaging young people in motivating experiences and authentic communication with their peers, but that when it comes to deeper processes of co-creation, participation and social transformation, there are limits to what can be expected, especially in short-term projects. Aspects like confrontation, controversy, constructive criticism, critical thinking and confidence-building, which were historically inherent in the pedagogy observed in European youth work, are less and less obvious in the methodology of European youth work projects that can be observed today.

6 Recent work on learning mobility as an educational concept: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262316/The-value-of-LM.pdf/c3c7cd96-9f81-3f26-4917-e7ff5f9d2640>.

We argue that to address these existentially challenging dilemmas in a credible manner and to remain relevant to young people's life worlds and the further development of the aspirational European integration project, as governments and institutions claim it should be, European youth work will have to become more effective in engaging young people meaningfully as citizens, impacting not only their civic and political acumen, but also their political agency. Unless the European youth work sector reconsiders its own 'politics' and works towards the development of a broad, open and permanently re-evaluated consensus on what it seeks to promote and defend through its interventions – i.e. unless it develops a principled stance towards its own idea of itself – it will be relegated to nothing more than lively debate within a politically predetermined spectrum of acceptable opinion.⁷ The time is ripe for radical renewal in the way that European youth work conceptualises its role and purpose, as well as in the way that it executes this mission. Radical renewal does not refer to revolution. Rather, it refers to a deliberate and reasoned paradigm change. It requires the idea of working within current systems to consolidate those aspects that are already working well, to rethink and change those that are not and to introduce new features which can fill the identified gaps.

In this context, Hendrik Otten's three framing principles for political education gain new relevance:⁸

- **The obligation to be intolerant:** 'in the sense of active intervention if human rights, as the ethical-political foundation of a European concept of justice, are violated'.
- **Democratising democracy:** 'as an ongoing process of imagining the impossible' and 'the co-creation of alternative European narratives by young citizens, together with other members of the "political" community'.
- **Going beyond 'personhood':** this implies 'the movement from being an ethical, but nevertheless passive and self-interested individual to being an interested and informed stakeholder in society that expresses solidarity through action in everyday life with others'.

7 Noam Chomsky: 'The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum', 'The Common Good', Odonian Press, 1998: https://books.google.de/books/about/The_Common_Good.html?id=I1UftBpLkWGc&redir_esc=y.

8 Christine Doddington (2007), quoted in Yael Ohana and Hendrik Otten, 'Where do you Stand: Intercultural Learning and Political Education in Contemporary Europe', VS Verlag Fur Sozialwissenschaften, 2012.

Areas of intervention

On the basis of the above principles, we have identified nine areas of intervention that are relevant for jump-starting such a process. The following considerations should not be understood as recommendations per se, but rather as starting points for further debate and discussion, and as an impetus for rethinking existing approaches and actions. Some aspects of what is discussed below are even already underway.

1. A transparent and joined up debate: Although of great concern to some in the community of practice, ‘the political’ in European youth work is a non-issue for the majority of mainstream youth policy and youth work policy stakeholders. Not only this, but where the debate takes place, it takes place in silos, revolving around particular niche communities of practice in specific institutions, in some countries and not in others. What is needed is a more inclusive and open European debate on the political and civic mission of European youth work and on how policy can support that mission. For this to happen, the dilemmas and the challenges they imply, identified here and elsewhere, need to be recognised as such and a mandated space needs to be opened up and facilitated in which a permanent, porous debate on the purposes, practice and content of European youth work and of European and national policies to support it is required. Some obvious opportunities are apparent, including the European Youth Work Convention, the creation of a European Youth Work Agenda and the process to promote the Council of Europe Recommendations on Youth Work.⁹ Past mistakes that should be avoided at all cost include a) that myriad, parallel processes emerge, and become closed, inward-looking and self-referential and b) that nothing of consequence happens in the policy sphere with the results of the debates that are initiated. Mechanisms for communicating these results need to be strengthened and become more transparent to stakeholders outside the policy sphere.

2. Facilitated peer learning: Many opportunities for people working in European youth work in different roles to exchange and learn from each other exist. Indeed, meetings of different parts of the communities of practice concerned have proliferated in recent years, with the establishment of various pools of trainers, European guilds, etc. However, and in line with the points in the debate mentioned above, very few

⁹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/recommendation-on-youth-work>.

of these opportunities a) focus on the political and civic mission of youth work and the most interesting and innovative practices for its implementation under today's political, cultural, social and economic conditions, b) are inter-disciplinary, i.e. involve stakeholders from all three corners of the youth policy triangle and c) refer to each other and engage with the content generated in another context. It goes without saying that educational practitioners need their own peer learning and networking opportunities, but they also need to hear from other disciplines (policy, research) and to learn from other sectors (formal education, private philanthropy, development cooperation, etc.) about their experiences. Various online and offline examples of good practice for this kind of initiative exist, but in line with the points made above about the need for a more joined up debate, this would require a more identifiably 'European youth work' branded platform.

3. More and better competence development opportunities and offers: As already noted, although competence profiles for youth workers and youth leaders engaged in European youth work exist, there are almost no corresponding training offers and opportunities, and those that do exist a) do not deal explicitly with the political and civic mission of youth work, b) are not repeated on a regular basis and c) do not function at scale. A good starting point to address this gap would be to operationalise the existing competence models into training offers, to reintroduce regular 'standardised' training courses for youth workers and youth leaders using the European programmes to learn the basics of critical emancipatory pedagogy and how to adapt it to current socio-political conditions that are relevant to the European youth work projects receiving funding. Furthermore, training is also needed for managers and project officers working in the European youth work programmes to ensure they develop a broad-based understanding of the civic and political mission of European youth work. Rather than a specialist niche, the political needs to once again become a fundamental framework consideration and content for European youth work.

4. Systematic evaluation and research: The European youth work field is no stranger to evaluation and research. Yet, there is insufficient empirical evidence on the contents of and pedagogy in use in projects supported by European programmes. An effort to map (i.e. identify or describe) key approaches to the political and the themes being addressed in European youth work projects, as well as some assessment of their effectiveness, would be a valuable supplement to what is already being documented

in terms of individual and organisational impacts of the European support available. In established youth work evaluation processes, a further starting point would be to include explicit enquiries into whether and how those conducting European youth work construct it as political. Ideally, the relationship between the impacts identified and the pedagogical approaches in use would also be explored. The organisation of such enquiries as participatory action youth research involving the young people concerned would put young people in the role of active co-creators of youth work. Finally, more attention has to be paid to gathering and analysing the results of relevant research to actually improve practice, programming and policy regarding the political in European youth work.

5. Fit for purpose funding: Funding policies, programmes and practices have an important influence on what the field produces in terms of work formats and approaches, as well as on the potential results and impacts of these. With the space for civil society closing all over Europe, funding approaches need to take into account new and unprecedented challenges to efforts for progressive social change as initiated and implemented by young people. European youth work could contribute to counteracting this closure and to overcoming some of those challenges by offering funding perspectives for work that could otherwise no longer be done. However, to be able to do this, a structural change in the funding operations of key stakeholders will be necessary. The potential for ‘low threshold’ funding that will encourage the participation of those who have least access and channel innovative practices from the field should be explored. So should the introduction or reintroduction of new or tried and tested formats of eligible activity and a reduction in prescriptions regarding expected outcomes of projects. By reducing unnecessary bureaucracy, developing more creative outreach strategies and favouring a culture of dialogue and communication with grantees, new publics of potential beneficiaries can be accessed.

6. Educational innovation: The current European context of resurgent nationalism and national populism, fear of racialised others and democratic deficits and backtracking requires explicit engagement with what young people think of the Europe they experience, with their sense of disenfranchisement and with their desire for a more just Europe and world. The goal must be to identify what they want to change and the strategies for doing so – in other words, alternative European narratives and mechanisms for their communication, for consensus-building around them and ultimately for

their implementation. To achieve this, pedagogy in European youth work needs to be politically explicit and should focus on critical engagement with themes and processes inherent to the health of democracy, locally, nationally and at the European level. It can no longer be considered adequate for participants to consume projects rather than actively taking responsibility for what happens in the project and the project context. The power dynamics that are inherent in the positioning of young people in projects must be a key quality criterion for assessment when it comes to grant-making, as well as a key question for the pedagogical approach. A pedagogy that puts more emphasis on young people and less emphasis on facilitators, one which considers socio-political context and the reinterpretation of concepts and ideas as important as the teaching of skills and the transmission of information and which works on enabling thinking and acting, are all urgently needed. Competence development and qualification frameworks for those conducting European youth work need to be adapted accordingly and relevant training opportunities need to be made available at scale.

7. Youth work contents: Furthermore, European youth work projects need to embrace political themes like ‘power’, Europe/European integration, politics and policy, democracy, rule of law and human rights as well as contemporary domestic and European controversies and dilemmas of contemporary society and history in an open and non-judgemental way. If policies of the European Union or one of its member states are counter to human dignity or will ultimately hollow out democracy or the rule of law, these should be fair game for discussion, debate and the proposition of alternatives. If governments and political elites are not doing enough to address climate change, then there should be space and opportunity in youth work projects for young people to develop their own strategies and to gain competences for engaging those political leaders. If political youth structures are not open and inclusive enough to be representative of the diversity of all young people, there should be space in European youth work to challenge this and experiment with new forms of democratic decision-making and receive support for presenting and implementing these alternatives. This means European youth work project programmes must encourage potential users to present projects that take up controversial issues rather than turning them away. Alternative narratives about European identity and about visions for Europe and European integration should be actively sought as results of European youth work projects. There should be opportunities for these ideas to be worked with at the policy level together with support to ensure that young people can run with them.

8. Co-creation of youth work with young people: Intimately linked to the above is the need for more emphasis to be placed on the co-creation of youth work projects and youth work policy with young people. Young people need to be in the lead and supported by others (professionals, adult volunteers, advisors). Ultimately, this means a recalibration of funding in favour of those projects which can show that the young people themselves are taking the decisions and managing the project, not just consuming project activities presented by organisations that work on behalf of young people to perpetuate their own existence. Rather than projects that seek funding and then seek participants, European youth work programmes should favour organisations that run with project ideas that have been sourced from among their youth constituencies (members, volunteer pools, peer groups) and that have been co-developed with them. This might mean the ‘de-professionalisation’ of the project funding application process, but does not have to mean less quality in terms of process or results. On the contrary, programmes will access new groups of beneficiaries and will become aware of new communities of practice, while at the same time speak to the core strength of traditional, membership-based organisations and support them to develop participation.

9. Europeanisation of youth work: If, for a very long time, the European dimension of youth work was the fact that young people from different countries came together and worked/lived together for a time to foster common understanding and peace, times in Europe have moved on and youth work needs to continue to move with the times. If it is to achieve its mission of critical Europe awareness, European youth work needs to Europeanise itself. So many standards, so many innovative practices and policy approaches are to a large extent marginalised in relation to national policies because they are the result of European and international cooperation. Increasingly, it is the member states of the European Union that are lagging behind on this point. Their national youth policies and their policies for the support of youth work at home need modernisation in line with European standards. To authentically support young people to learn about Europe and to be European means to focus on supporting young people to work on what Europe claims as its values – human rights, rule of law, democracy and peace – and to take a position on the deficits and gaps in European integration and cooperation and Europe’s position and responsibility in the world. This, however, cannot be achieved without critical engagement on domestic policies and positions in relation to Europe and global processes, something that many governments, even within the EU, are simply not willing to currently admit. Hence, there is a job of advocacy

towards the European institutions and towards national governments to be done by European youth work, for a European approach to youth work policy development and implementation. This is not something that sits well with the European youth work community of practice's perception of itself. We have come full circle to the need for an open and transparent debate.

The European youth sector has already begun with some work on all of these 'starting points'. The challenge is how to make them more explicit, visible and accessible to the wider community of practice and the variety of stakeholder groups concerned. A further challenge is how to bring them into the mainstream of the political and policy debates important to the European youth sector, linking them to each other in a way that forms a viable agenda.

For this to happen, political championship is required.

The question remains: who is going to stand up for the political in European youth work?

About the author

Yael Ohana is a specialist of intercultural political education, international youth work and youth policy. She is a practitioner of human rights and intercultural political education through international youth work with some 20 years' experience in facilitation, training and non-formal education with young adults, learning the trade at the European Youth Centres of the Council of Europe where she was an Educational Advisor from 2000–2005. In 2005, Yael founded an independent education and research consultancy called Frankly Speaking – Training, Research, Development (www.frankly-speaking.org). Through Frankly Speaking, she conducted projects to assist a variety of clients ranging from youth organisations to United Nations agencies through European institutions in their efforts to support youth participation, empowerment and development. Yael has contributed to the development of the youth and social policies of a variety of national institutions, notably in the Western Balkans, through technical assistance and evaluation projects. She further facilitated the development of the strategies of several international institutions working in the youth field. Her clients have included Amnesty International, the Council of Europe, National Agencies of the Erasmus+ Programme, UNFPA, the Roma Education Fund, the European Youth Forum, the European Cultural Foundation and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office for the Western Balkans. In January 2019, Yael joined the Open Society Foundations as Executive Advisor to the Director of the Berlin Hub Office. Yael studied Modern Languages, European Studies and Political Science. Hailing from Dublin in Ireland, Yael has lived and worked all over Europe.

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