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What Future for the Young? Reflections on the Challenges Facing Europe's Young Generation

Keynote for the conference "Children of Transition, Children of War. The 'Generation of Transformation' from a European Perspective"

University of Vienna 3-5 November, 2016

The topic of this conference deals with the post-Cold War generation in Europe's conflict and transformation societies. The focus will thus be on the young generation emanating from Eastern and South-eastern Europe, the 'Wendekinder' and the post-Soviet youth. This is a highly pertinent issue, and - as far as I am concerned – the present conference is by far the most comprehensive academic exercise to date. We should be thankful to Professor Gries and his enthusiastic team for having ventured so deeply into this topic.

I would like to approach this topic from a slightly broader perspective and trace a wider arc to encompass the young generation in all of Europe. More to the point; I'd like to use this opportunity to reflect on the challenges facing Europe's youth today.

There are of course many issues specific to young people in the East and South of Europe, like dealing with the trauma of wars on the territory of former Yugoslavia, the collective memory in post-Soviet societies, or identity in the former GDR. Upcoming panels will delve into all of those, thanks to the excellent experts invited here.

Still, I believe that change and transformation is a universal experience of the young generation today; in fact, this has always been the case. There are many experiences shared by young people not only in the post-communist sphere, but by youth from across the continent, which are worth looking into. Issues of "Europeanness and

Nationalism", of modes and degrees of political participation, and of migration and integration will be on your agenda in the coming days. I am convinced that these issues are topical for young people all over Europe, no matter if they're from the East or West, North or South.

I recently had the opportunity to work closely with young people in Europe and in the US, while teaching at universities in Vienna and Berkeley. These students formed a diverse group, comprising individuals from the UK to Serbia and from Hong Kong to New York. What I learned is that many of the hopes and fears of young people are pretty much alike, no matter where they live and where they come from. They are informed by the world they grew into, defined by the great disruptions and transformations of the past 30 years. Central to the experience of youth today is economic insecurity: The young generation we are talking of – the 16-30 year olds of today – witnessed its formative experience in the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath.

Many of the problems European societies and the European Union in particular face today are connected to this greatest global challenge in a lifetime. These problems range from the – obviously related – massive sovereign debt and Euro crises, to the rise of populist and authoritarian political parties, the Euroscepticism which culminated in Brexit, as well as a more generalized feeling of disenchantment with politics as expressed most directly in social media.

However, beyond the incisive experience of these interrelated crises, this generation is also moulded by transformations that they have not consciously witnessed or that happened before they were even born but which nevertheless set the stage for developments to come.

By this I mean the end of the ideological standoff between the Global East and the Global West after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and its consequences:

First, the seemingly unchallenged supremacy of the (neo)-liberal capitalist democracy subsumed under the catchphrase "there is no alternative." Second, the related turn of Europe's social democratic parties towards 'third way' politics, and third, above all, the boundless optimism of the 1990s. These three fundamentals epitomized the hopes of a 'New World Order' of a liberal, rules based international system.

But America's "unipolar moment" also led to attempts at creating peace and order by force through so-called "humanitarian interventions" from Bosnia and Kosovo to Afghanistan, Iraq and finally Libya.

These developments led to high hopes for a better future – definitely in the post-communist sphere, but also in the rest of Europe. We are aware today, however, that soon, many of these hopes have been bitterly frustrated. Importantly, the 1990s and early 2000s saw the great promises of the European Union still untarnished and intact: The opening of borders for the free movement of capital and labour, the introduction of the common currency, and the rapid eastward expansion of the European Union had not yet shown their downsides. In hindsight, these were developments in which the abstract ideal of European integration, coupled with technocratic optimism, ran far ahead of what was actually feasible. European politics chose to ignore the obvious problems looming ahead: Keeping institutional arrangements built on unanimity, able – rather unable - to act, while doubling the number of member states - is just one example. Building a common currency area comprising states with radically different economic fundamentals and no transfer mechanism is another. The assumption was that to come to an agreement now, and to act later. Inherent contradictions would be resolved once

they posed actual problems. Reality has taught us otherwise, and the consequences of these unresolved problems haunt us to this very day.

Thus, in short, the story of the young generation is one of a generation of disillusionment, insecurity, and shattered hopes:

There exists today disillusionment with politics in general; disillusionment with the European project; disillusionment with the idea of progress and the promise of a better future; and the list is much longer: Alongside this came insecurity in terms of the economy, jobs and a better life than one's parents had; but also insecurity in terms of identity.

The questions of one's place in the world, of the right way to live; these concerns are as pertinent as ever, and perhaps harder to answer now. As Francis Fukuyama, who, in the heydays of optimism post-1989, declared the "End of History," had already observed back then, there is a "void at the centre" of the liberal democratic order. In the place where, not much later, other ideologies offered a core of identity, liberal democracy was lacking.

This void is increasingly being filled with concepts of centuries past – religion, ethnicity, and nation – all categories of identity that have made – often violent – comebacks.

Of course, it's not only disillusionment and frustration that characterizes this generation – quite to the contrary: Reality is always more complex than a simple narrative suggests. While some of the most fervent anti-EU populist movements today are carried by young people – like Marine le Pen's Front National – and many young today are embracing nationalist ideas and populist movements, it is equally true that some of the staunchest supporters of a unified and democratic Europe emanate from that very same generation: Young people in Britain voted overwhelmingly for 'Remain.' The young and educated

have grown up accustomed to the benefits of an open Europe: Free movement within Schengen, Erasmus exchange programmes, and a continent defined by peace and cooperation. They consume the privileges of a united Europe, and they want to believe in a better, albeit different, future. Thus, what we see is a muddled, often contradictory, picture; images of a generation that is split between frustration and hope.

What is most important for understanding the drivers of these conflicting stances is to ask the right questions, such as: What are the underlying reasons driving young people to either resent or believe in a united Europe? Where are the roots of the more recent tendency towards populism and authoritarianism in many parts of Europe? How can we overhaul – reinvent – our economic system to deliver jobs and a better future for this and coming generations, and make it sustainable? How can fundamental needs be fulfilled in a world where nation states are increasingly at the mercy of global (market) forces? What influence does the internet and social media have on this generation's conception of the world and approach to politics in particular? And what about the often-attested apathy of the young towards established politics? These are grand questions, and I don't have answers, just observations to offer.

The most obvious observation is that of an economic malaise facing today's youth. As I've said before, the mutually reinforcing economic crises of the past years and their dire social consequences are probably THE formative experience of an entire generation. And even though the economies of many European states are somewhat recovering, young people do not enjoy the benefits of this feeble growth.

Youth unemployment is rampant across the continent – 21% average in the Euro zone, 60% in Greece and 50% in Spain – and successful EU programmes to counter it – like the

Youth Employment Initiative – face budget cuts. Job growth in recent years has been almost entirely in precarious employment situations – zero hour contracts in the UK, Leiharbeit in Germany, and endless internships everywhere. According to the latest Eurobarometer Youth Survey – polling over 10.000 young Europeans aged 16-30 – more than half the respondents feel marginalized and excluded from economic and social life in their country as a consequence of the crisis!

However, economic volatility of the past few years did not come out of nowhere, and its root causes are connected with the reasons behind the social dislocation of parts of the population, with a yearning for identity and belonging that sometimes makes people turn towards authoritarianism.

To paraphrase Vergniaud's saying, coined in the context of the French Revolution:

The revolution of 1989 – albeit peaceful – still devoured its children.

Unopposed neo-liberal ideology did not end up bringing unimagined freedom and prosperity to the masses; instead, it empowered financial markets that created the crisis. It also enabled the disruptive change in the post-communist sphere, where the so-called economic "shock-therapy" brought immense wealth to the few, and mostly hardship to the many. Even in well-off states like Germany and Austria, the purchasing power is today lower than it was 15 years ago.

The freedom implicit in liberalism can mean a dog-eats-dog world where the stronger prevails and it can undermine the very foundations of the democratic process. This is what Colin Crouch has described as *"post-democracy"*: A formally democratic system, in which the forces of privatization and globalization have created – very much in the vein of the so-called "Washington Consensus" – a situation where multinational corporations and transnational market forces effectively constrain politicians' ability to shape society.

Another aspect of a post-democratic society is the dissolution of group identities, where individuals find it increasingly harder to find representation of their interests in political parties. Indeed, this societal dislocation is inherent in liberalism generally, not only in economic neo-liberalism: Liberal freedom grants the individual a sense of space, but robs it of a sense of place. This is the great challenge that post-modernity poses to the individual and many are not up to face it.

That's what is, at least in part, behind the return to identity concepts of nation and religion. The seeming or real inability of politics today in the face of all-dominant "market forces" is embodied by the mantra "there is no alternative", which has been applied to everything from the common currency to the bail-out of banks that were "too big to fail" as well as to the imposition of harsh, destructive austerity measures on the countries of Europe's south. Traditional parties have thus become mere custodians of a "market-conforming" democracy, and the consequential decisions are made on the European level, where democratic legitimacy is remote. It is this obvious inability of contemporary national politics to act, and the absence of any kind of societal vision, that may explain why so many young people have turned their back on traditional mass parties.

These parties speak uniformly of their attempts to foster economic growth and employment and vary only slightly in their policy approach. Clearly, economic growth does not benefit the young generation enough, and the promises of more jobs don't excite a generation that has grown accustomed to precarious employment situations, trapped in cycles of internships and part-time work.

In this situation, populist parties appear to be the only ones capable of coming up with a competing vision, and a vent to channel the anger many feel – often against 'elites' and the EU and sometimes, regrettably, against those with even less to their names: refugees,

migrants, the poor. The truth though is that neither dismantling the EU nor keeping out-groups down can alleviate this dilemma. This is the problem with the easy answers populism has to offer.

One further development that contributes to the shift of the young generation away from the political centre and towards the fringes deserves mention here: It is the emergence of the internet and social media – which almost half of young Europeans think is beneficial to the democratic process, according to the Eurobarometer Youth Survey 2016. Social Media have levelled the playing field between mainstream voices and extremists; it has also created echo-chambers, reinforcing pre-existing conceptions of the world and fostering beliefs in conspiracy-theories and radical ideas. According to a recent Pew Research study, over half of the young generation get their news predominantly online, compared to only 15% of age cohort ranging 50-64. With this in mind, it is striking how bad traditional political parties and establishment news media are in terms of gaining online followers, compared to populist parties and fringe media. Compare Austria's Freedom Party leader who has 400.000 facebook fans to Federal Chancellor Kern's 80.000, and one has to wonder how a 19th century concept such as nationalism can resound so well with the children of the 21th century, and why it can be transported so perfectly through a technology that transcends all fundamental pillars of nationalism – locality, borders, hierarchy, rigidity.

So what then is the young generation supposed to do in the face of these developments? It has become a truism to diagnose and bemoan the apparent political apathy and conformism of youth today, and call them to action. Stéphane Hessel's *Indignez vous!/Time for outrage!* comes to mind – and it seems that many old, white men are

upset that today's generation can't seem to stage its own 1968 – that in the face of unprecedented societal challenges, kids these days keep their heads down.

This is both untrue and unfair! Why is this the case, you ask? First, the circumstances of today don't compare to the 1960s: Economic insecurity and rising demands on the labour market make fundamental opposition to the system a luxury few can afford anymore. Secondly, it is simply not true that the young generation is not politically active. What is true is that only few still feel represented by the traditional parties both to the right and the left of centre, and even fewer wish to join them. Whether this is a problem of the young generation or of these parties is anyone's guess.

What is true, however, is that the young generation is indeed politically active, just outside of the conventional framework: Be it ad-hoc and leaderless movements like Occupy, or it's Spanish counterpart, *los indignados* – directly inspired by Hessel – taking to the streets to denounce the excesses of the finance industry, and managing to bring "inequality" onto the political and media agenda, or the 18% that expressed interest in joining NGOs and pressure groups in the latest Eurobarometer Youth survey. Even the young nationalists of the "Identitären"-movement and the standard bearers of the populist and neo-authoritarian parties throughout Europe are "political" – and part of the problem. All of them can hardly be dismissed as politically disinclined.

However, what is true is that none of these movements has yet managed to launch a process leading to a progressive societal transformation. If there are any successful and profound transformations in Europe recently, it's probably the rise of illiberal, authoritarian governments, and the accompanying dismissal of European institutions and values.

So where do we stand?

We are facing a situation of great – even historic – challenges: The yearning for categories of the past, a "*wann wird es endlich wieder gestern,*" – "*when will it finally be yesterday again,*" the calls for a stronger nation-state, clear identities, and even authoritarian leaders is vaguely understandable in the face of the uncertainty that comes with the dislocation and upheaval in the wake of globalization. But there is no reverting to the past! European nation-states can't face today's economic forces and political problems on their own, let alone global challenges such as climate change and migration. Still, the modus operandi of the European Union, namely that 'there is no alternative' to neo-liberal economic and trade policies, cannot go unchallenged, and the tendency of the Union to resort to technocratic, elitist decision making is no help in alleviating the discontent surrounding it. What is needed is the formulation of a new grand vision, and hard work to ensure the Union's functioning in the interest of its citizens, and not in that of vested interests in Brussels; those of banks and of trans-national corporations.

I am coming to the end of my keynote, but let me mention yet another development splitting the young generation in two: The division in its members' outlook on the world. It has been shown that the best predictor for what views young people hold on the EU, on immigration, and other pressing political issues is education.

This widening "education divide" adds yet another dimension to the societal divisions of left-right, and democratic-authoritarian, and this split poses a special problem for the countries of East and Southeast Europe, where wages are low, jobs are scarce, and many young people dream of leaving to find a better life elsewhere. In today's knowledge society, it's often the young and educated who manage to escape their country of origin. But how can these countries manage a successful transformation, politically and economically, if their best and brightest leave the country? Stemming this 'brain-drain'

and closing the gap between the west of Europe and the rest of Europe is a vital challenge for Europe's future.

Finally, another challenge today is - to think again in terms of generations, not individuals only. The young generation might not have a strong lobby, and is politically underrepresented. But if European political decision-making ignores the youth's needs and demands, it runs the risk of creating a new 'lost generation', or, to borrow a phrase from Ernest Hemingway, a "generation in between" the promises of '89 and the realities of an increasingly chaotic world, robbed of a future by the meltdown of the financial system and the sclerosis of a European Union in which the gulf between aspiration and reality is ever widening.