

Tobias Flessenkemper, 10 June 2022

The European Year of Youth 2022

Aspects of a Genealogy of European Youth Cooperation

The European Union has declared 2022 as the European Year of Youth. For more than a century now young people and the concept of youth have played an important role in the imagination of international, European and national politics. This recent display of interest should be seen against the reality of the dwindling importance of youth policy as well as the declining total and relative numbers of young people in Europe. The declaratory youth focus of European institutions today is, arguably, in reverse proportion to the actual attention, investment, funding, creativity and energy dedicated to altering the predicament of the young generation. The balance used to be better in the past, although youth policies, as both generational and social policies, have never been free from ideology, moral panicking, and tokenism. This paper aims to sketch out some elements of the political genealogy of European youth cooperation over the last hundred years: starting from Brussels in 2022, through Strasbourg in 1972 back to Geneva in 1922. The aim is to help contextualise the 2022 European Year of Youth within a series of actions taken since the 1920s at international level. Research and analysis of the youth cooperation sector's genealogy now seems even more pertinent as European states discuss the renewal of democracy after the start of the war against Ukraine and the rupture with the Russian Federation.

Brussels 2022: European Year of Youth

The State of the Union speech on 15 September 2021 at the European Parliament in Strasbourg was marked by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. One idea, however, stuck out: European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen proposed a European Year of Youth 2022, stating that it will be “a year dedicated to empowering those who have dedicated so much to others.” It was a rare moment in contempo-

rary European politics that young people were so frequently mentioned. One could feel how the Commission President wanted to project a sense of moral obligation towards young people, while not missing the opportunity to link that to the future of ‘Europe’.

When President von der Leyen spoke, the EU had come a long way in relation to youth questions. Twenty years earlier, against some member state and internal Commission resistance, the then Commissioner Viviane Reding presented the White Paper *A New Impetus for European Youth*. Thanks to the support of the European Youth Forum, the White Paper's ambition went beyond youth mobility, into promoting comprehensive youth policies. Youth has been a challenging issue for the European Union. The Union possesses almost no competencies in youth matters. It is not able to address many of the policy questions affecting youth directly as a social category, such as education, vocational training, labour markets, higher education, health, social protection, housing, or family law. In all these areas the EU's competencies are highly circumscribed. Since the late 1980s, though, the EU has had significant success in fostering youth mobility and student exchange schemes. For some 30 years cohorts of young people have “experienced Europe” thanks to subsidised educational exchanges, transnational vocational training, participatory projects and voluntary service placements. The Erasmus scheme, Youth for Europe, and their successors have come to be seen as a key tool for forging a ‘European identity’.

Yet EU cooperation during the 21st century has also hit up against limitations. Major socio-economic events affecting young people, such as the economic crisis after 2008, and its impact on young people's lives, did not lead to meaningful policy coordination and structural reforms benefiting youth. EU economic crisis management policies often even exacer-

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bated problems for young people, in particular austerity, reducing young people's access to rights and services. More recently, the European Commission was not visibly advocating for more and better youth policies in the context of the recovery and resilience plans. Not a single member state plan was clearly designed with the aim to do more for young people. There remains a whole action field on "policies for next generations" to be filled intellectually, politically and financially by European institutions. The window of opportunity of the recovery and resilience drive was not used.

Against this background, the Commission's statement on their website for the launch of the youth year in January 2022 may seem like hyperbole:

Make your voice heard! 2022 is the European Year of Youth, shining a light on the importance of European youth to build a better future – greener, more inclusive and digital. With plenty of opportunities to learn, share your vision, meet people and engage in activities all over Europe, the European Year of Youth is the moment to move forward with confidence and hope in a post-pandemic perspective. Find out what the Year has in store for you and join in the #EuropeanYearOfYouth !

The statement evokes the feeling of hollowness of the EU's response to the predicament of today's young people. Unfazed by the demands of young people themselves, of youth organisations, of scientific evidence-based research, the Commission continued its practice of policy-making "on a whim" by the sudden launch of the Year of Youth. Also: making voices heard does not include being listened to. This continues to be the experience of those who expected more from youth cooperation, both in and with the EU. The 8 million Euro budget for the European Year of Youth seems tokenistic in view of the challenges described by the Commission. By way of comparison, the Tirana European Youth Capital 2022, an initiative by the European Youth Forum and youth organisations, has almost the same budget, yet for a local rather than continental scale.

The Europeanist tropes contained in the Commission statement nevertheless contain important cues pointing to the origins and historical transformations of various strands and drivers of European youth cooperation in the past. To understand, even describe, the predicament of youth cooperation in today's European Union, it is useful to look at the genealogy of youth in international cooperation.

Why European youth cooperation?

Why do states cooperate in the fields of youth? Youth as a concept, youth organisations and cooperation, nationalism and internationalism share many common roots in the 19th century. The problem of winning over "hearts and minds" for national and later international political projects and the methods of social engineering of "future generations" goes back to the late 18th century in Europe. This area also constitutes several strands of action at European level. 19th century nationalists, socialists, Christian reformists and others all got involved in shaping the young generation "to build a better future". The 20th century accelerated these processes through mass media, communication and transportation as well as mobilisation in war. Fascism and Communism, in particular, were immensely skilled in mobilising the youth for their own aims, including transnationally. Mutatis mutandis we find this idea in the 19th century maxime about nation-building: *L'Italia è fatta. Bisogna fare gli italiani* (Italy was made. Now we must make Italians.). It is the analogy used by Europeanists hoping to create a European consciousness, focussing once again on youth as 'agents of change'.

Cooperation between states and transnational networks to mobilise youth for their political aims constitutes a key strand of thinking on European youth. It is common to combine this with the claim of "participation", reflected by the Commission's call "make your voices heard". How far such claims will be honoured through policy change is the key test that needs to be applied to distinguish democratic from transactional, rhetorical, utilitarian, authoritarian or totalitarian practice. The Commission wants youth to: "move forward with confidence and hope in a post-pandemic perspective", it is the COVID-19 reference that makes a traditional trope contemporary. Although the pandemic could be replaced with any other cataclysm after which a "better future" is awaiting. What is missing in 2022 are the values of European unity such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In fairness, they do feature as well, but not in pole position. Hence, Europe in 2022 is not centrally conceptualised as a space of freedom, peace and justice.

Strasbourg 1972: Council of Europe youth sector

Half a century earlier, in 1972, Europe was also "in the making". The high hopes of European unity that

brought to life the Organisation for Economic Cooperation in Europe in Paris in 1948, the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in 1949, the European Coal and Steel Community in Luxembourg in 1951, and the European Economic Community (EEC) in Brussels in 1957 had all but slowed down by the mid-1960s and the impasse of the UK's membership of the EEC. Yet "la relance de l'Europe" after 1969 brought with it tumultuous times. The student and youth protests of May 1968 triggered the first international parliamentary debate on youth policy in the Parliamentary Assembly in Strasbourg. Then in 1972 there was the historic development of a dedicated and distinctive space for young people within an international organisation: the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg.

The building's opening marked the launch of the Council of Europe youth sector with its unique features of co-management between youth organisations and governments, participatory educational and training approaches, as well as innovative forms and methods of work by, for and with young people. In the wake of the momentous year of 1968, German Foreign Minister Willy Brandt said about young people: "It is not enough to listen. We must meet their challenge, be prepared to question ourselves and to learn." A different approach than the one seen in 2022 discussed above. The key impetus for the Council of Europe to consolidate the youth sector also came from Willy Brandt who was elected Chancellor in 1969. Brandt pursued an agenda of democratisation, domestically and at European level in the Council of Europe. His government, in partnership with others, in particular Norway, concluded an almost ten year long preparation to create a Council of Europe youth sector. The Council of Europe youth sector was supposed to become a tool of modernisation, establishing the principle of co-management between states and youth organisations of the activities of both the Centre and the European Youth Foundation.

The opening of the European Youth Centre and the establishment of the European Youth Foundation represent the culmination point of a decade-long effort to structure European youth cooperation, rather than its beginning. European youth cooperation was driven by a nexus of ideological-structural-organisational factors. They are similar and overlapping, yet not identical to the strands of international and European youth cooperation analysed in the previous section. The main motivation for youth cooperation in

the Council of Europe's Council for Cultural Cooperation (CCC) was political, embodied in the objectives of European unity based on the values of liberty and freedom.

Human rights values, intergovernmental cooperation of Western democracies and independent youth organizations advanced youth policies within the Council of Europe through to the 1990s: there was considerable political agreement about the values of liberal democracy, closely-knit intergovernmental working structures that themselves fostered Europeanisation and an independent and pluralistic body of youth organisations. These were organised at each member state level through a democratically legitimised National Youth Council, together with international non-governmental youth organisations, fostering Europeanisation and cooperation at associate levels of society. These drivers also made possible the speedy enlargement of the youth sector within the Council of Europe. This found expression in the system of co-management of the Council of Europe youth sector that exists until today. Youth cooperation at European level was primarily a tool for developing democracy in Europe. The year 1972 marks the moment when the orientation was broadened from an originally more conservative and affirmative, to a more participatory, critical and gradually more diverse approach. The personality of Willy Brandt stands symbolically for this shift. By 1963 he was already advocating for a European youth body to add a "progressive" component with Nordic and other social-democratic countries, balancing the Franco-German Youth Office which was created by the conservative duo of the previous generation, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and President Charles de Gaulle. The EEC participated in the work taking place in Strasbourg, first in an observer capacity and increasingly more actively, not least as it was the European organisation dealing with the socio-economic questions concerning young people. The motivation to set up a Youth Forum of the European Communities in 1978 was, to some degree, also the result of the various crises of the 1970s and the fear of losing the new generation's support for the project of European unity ahead of the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979.

Geneva 1922: The League of Nations and the Youth

50 years earlier, in 1922, international and European youth cooperation of states was just making its way onto the agenda of the League of Nations. However, the preoccupations of the League were not entirely dissimilar to the concerns of the EEC in the 1970s and today: how to inform and engage young people in the work of international organisation. Despite the terrible losses of the First World War, Europe was a populous and young continent. The roughly 500 million Europeans represented between a third and quarter of the world's population, and out of those many were under the age of 30. Today, Europe represents less than 10% of the world's population and only 1 in 4 people is under the age of 30. European youth in 1922 was numerically and politically dominating the global discourse. It was also because the concept of youth and its political usefulness for nation-builders. After the War nationalism and the emergence of new European nation states only exacerbated these dynamics. For the members of the League of Nations the challenge was to enlist the support of the young people of Europe for the aspirational aims of the new organisation.

The stakes for liberal internationalists were obvious. In October 1922, the March on Rome established Fascist power in Italy. The Bolshevik Revolution transformed the Russian Empire into the Soviet Union which was proclaimed on 28 December 1922. Both Fascists and Communists were keen investors in youth and set up youth organisations to win over the new generations for their political projects. Still marginal, but 1922 also marks the founding of the 'Hitler Youth', the youth organisation of the Nazi party. While other youth organisations were also created in the 1920s, such as the global Scout Movement, politically the League of Nations was confronted with a lack of support, revisionism and revanchism. The British substitute delegate to the League Assembly in 1923, the humanitarian and conservative Women Rights' activist Edith Lyttleton proposed a resolution on youth. The fourth Assembly of the League of Nations on 27 September 1923, urged: *"the Governments of the States Members to arrange that the children and*

youth in their respective countries, where such teaching is not given, be made aware of the existence and aims of the League of Nations and the terms of its Covenant." They also called for youth meetings to be facilitated and organised. While internationalists had been promoting international and cosmopolitan education among their young members, this resolution marks a break-through. Fostering international orientation, promoting peace and other aims of the League, specifically targeting young people, became the focus of international cooperation.

Whereto from here?

The years 2022, 1972 and 1922 are key dates for European youth cooperation. 1922 opened a space at the level of international organisations for discussing questions of youth, and formed an alliance between non-governmental youth organisations, the League of Nations and later UN organisations, advancing an internationalist peace and cooperation agenda. Those links and ideas nurtured the genesis of the Council of Europe youth sector and the creation of the European Youth Centre in 1972. These lines include ideological aspects, securing freedom and preventing a relapse into totalitarian dictatorship, and structural and organisational continuities. The result is another first: the co-management of a political training and education programme within an international organisation, including purpose-built architecture, as a reflection of this democratic ambition. The European Year of Youth 2022 is based on these origins and offers another historic transformation. Despite having developed tools for youth policy coordination in 2001, the Commission approach has an aura of timid tokenism reflective of the current crisis of European unity. In this respect, the situation of youth cooperation in Europe does not differ from the predicament of European cooperation in general. Further work on the genealogy of youth policy in Europe will help to develop ideas for the future.