

YOUTH IN EUROPE
OFFENBURG
TALKS “ ”

#3 BRIEF

SHRINKING SPACES FOR
YOUTH WORK!? –
CHALLENGES FOR
POST-DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

11th – 12th November 2020 VIRTUAL MEETING

The series YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS are expert workshops on themes and phenomena relevant to the youth sector. They aim at achieving a better knowledge and understanding of youth work and youth policy in Europe and are organised by five National Agencies of Erasmus+ Youth (JINT Belgium / Flanders; Estonian Agency for Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps, Education and Youth Board; EDUFI Finland; JUGEND für Europa Deutschland; Movit Slovenia). The contents of this briefing paper are based on the inputs and discussions in the workshop and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the National Agencies for Erasmus+ Youth organising it.



National Agency (Germany)
Erasmus+ Youth in Action
European Solidarity Corps



BACKGROUND

The aim of the 3rd edition on 'SHRINKING SPACES FOR YOUTH WORK!?' – CHALLENGES FOR POST-DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES' was to reflect on new political developments in our societies, in particular with regard to youth work as a part of civil society and the third sector and to take a look at the state of art of youth work in providing spaces for young people and building bridges to support youth transitions in times of 'post-democracy' and 'neoliberalism', thus considering how youth work can respond to related challenges. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the 3rd YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALK took place digitally on 11th and 12th November 2020 with 35 participants. Plenary presentations were live-streamed and could be followed on social media. On each day, there were four 20-minute presentations followed by reflection groups to debate the issues at hand. Discussions were concluded with summary reflections by rapporteurs. The inputs as well as key points and results of discussions are summarised in a concise report which be found here: <https://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/ueber-jfe/projekte/YouthInEurope-OffenburgTalks/>.

A reader with summaries of inputs and videos of all contributions can be found on a dedicated channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXqdbhR1bA46ww1De52D0Jg?view_as=subscriber.

IN BRIEF

The inputs and discussions of the 3rd YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALK on 'SHRINKING SPACES FOR YOUTH WORK!?' – CHALLENGES FOR POST-DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES' can be summarised as follows:

- Whether or not the space for youth work is shrinking, growing or simply changing depends besides methodological and analytical questions on the diversity of democratic trajectories which are influencing framework conditions for civil society. From a European perspective, spaces at national levels seem to shrink while at global level they seem to expand.
- A controversial issue is whether shrinking spaces for civil society are a result of intentional strategies or of political disinterest, indifference and ignorance in individual countries. Both might be true, depending on the social and political realities in each country. From this perspective, shrinking, growing or changing spaces are also a result of social and political recognition of youth work as a social and educational practice.
- The 'professionalisation' of youth work is undoubtedly something positive, in particular in terms of quality development. However, it may also contribute to the neutralisation of its capacity to work alongside young people in the provision and defence of civic space.
- Digitalisation of all spheres of life provides many extra opportunities, but it is also another element in an already long list of risk factors in the lives and prospects of young

people. Youth work can play an important role by helping young people to take a critical look at digital technologies as well as the content they deliver.

- Collecting the narratives of young people, giving them space to tell stories of their daily lives and in their own languages and styles is a key dimension of youth work and youth research in conjunction with more classical quantitative and qualitative methodologies.
- Youth work spaces are often considered to be 'laboratories for democracy', since they create opportunities, enable emancipation and offer coaching to young people to construct own standpoints and choices. In this regard, youth work(ers) can help with a theoretical understanding of the challenges and a practical capability to interpret these challenges.
- Youth is clearly no homogeneous group. Young people can be differentiated in many, many ways, as privileged or 'ordinary', middle- or working-class, 'at risk' or marginalised kids. It has to be questioned who participates in which kind of youth work activities and which offers for whom do shrink and which expand.
- Youth work must maintain its efforts to reach more widely and deeply into the youth population but it must also strengthen its reach into the corners of decision-making, without losing a critical distance from policy structures and maintaining an independence of thought and method.
- This leads to a consideration of those providing and doing youth work: the necessity of a pluralistic, comprehensive model for youth work sits in contrast to a corporatist approach that obstructs new initiatives, organisations and movements from entering the youth work sector.
- And finally: Europe. A European impetus towards youth work (policy) can help to frame and support youth work development at all levels. Vice versa, the national, regional and local traditions of practice with young people need to be woven into the European youth work space.

CONCLUSION

The (controversial) issue of shrinking, growing or changing spaces for civil society can be discussed from different perspectives, within which there is a variety of related themes, such as recognition, professionalisation, digitalisation, education, young people themselves, the community of practice, and Europe. Irrespective of the answer to the question of whether spaces are shrinking, growing or changing, it seems that youth work at all levels can profit from a tailwind coming from the European level.

In this respect the final declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention (7 to 10 December 2020) entitled 'Signposts for the Future' sets out suggestions for the implementation of a strong 'European Youth Work Agenda' and related 'Bonn Process', providing an indispensable and highly visible contribution to growing spaces for youth work policy and youth work itself, its capacities, awareness and recognition.

