



FEPS

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RENEWING SOCIAL DEMOCRACY
CONTRIBUTIONS TO A EUROPEAN-WIDE DEBATE

← **NEXT LEFT** →

**Social democracy
for the next generation**

Points for a debate

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Our society has changed is an introductory sentence to most of the groundbreaking, ideological debates. Surely, it steadily evolves. The generations are being replaced by the “future” ones, which while growing older take not only their place within an adult world, but also gain influence and shape reality. Their specific approach, formed by history on one side and by the demands of contemporary challenges on the other, is what makes the times they live in characteristic and unique.

Naturally, the debate on the renewal of the European social democracy incorporates the elaborations on how the society changed. There are several methodological approaches one can imagine to take in order to assess these transformation – to name few examples, one can see it via the prism of sociology (using the concepts such as class to describe that), via prism of anthropology (looking at the cultural dimension) or political sciences (examining the developments within the political system and the meaning of political representation).

Surely more challenging would be an attempt to merge these methods, which is also what reports available on the EU level (such as Eurostat, Eurobarometer) would encourage to do. That would invite to analyse specifically an age group – so called “future” generation (age 15 – 30) of Europeans. Reaching the overall result in which the general behavioural tendencies were analysed could be of a great importance for social democracy in its attempt to rebuild itself, re-establish the connection between them as political formation and the society, and ultimately regain power.

For the below enclosed deliberations, following sources were used: FEPS Next Left Focus Group Discussion Paper and meetings materials, EU statistical datas (Eurostat, Eurobarometer), EP and EC Reports, and last but not least the materials of the S&D Group Round Table on youth and social democracy (which took place in Brussels, Belgium on 12th May 2010).

The remarks are of a general nature. One could argue that further, in-depth studies would be necessary to enrich the findings and make them more feasible for practical use. Authors agree with that assessment, underlining that the aim is to draw attention to certain interesting aspects rather than provide a full fledged, complete answers.

1) Basic facts about the contemporary young Europeans

According to the Eurostat¹ there are 96 million people in the age group of 15 – 29 years in Europe. This means that they constitute 1/5 of the population. The most “youthful” states are: Ireland, Cyprus, Slovakia and Poland (where youth constitutes 24%). The “oldest” states are: Denmark, Germany and Italy (where youth constitutes 18% of the societies).

¹ Youth in Europe. A statistical portrait. 2009 edition

The proportion mirrors the tendency that has been widely recognised as the ageing of population. The phenomena of it has been widely spoken about, but specifically for social democracy should become a central factor to be taken into account while talking about the future of a Social Europe and while re-designing the welfare state for the 21st century.

The same Eurostat describes the current youth as “no hurry generations”. The description may not be a surprise, especially for all those, who read the classic studies of the 90s such as “Generation X” (by D.Coupland). The reasoning behind this description is the context of maturing. It is said that the young people today leave their parental houses, and thus socially mature later than their parents. Young women tend to leave their parents’ homes earlier than young man, but even they do it on average at the age of 22 only. Which is considerably later than their parents did. Mostly the reason is an economic one – 44%, so almost half, of the young Europeans consider that they cannot afford that. Within this group every second person says that this is due to the fact that there are not enough affordable housing.

These numbers are essential for social democracy to consider while responding to the question on how they perceive a life of a human being to be in its length and thus its different periods: education, labour market, pension etc. Recreating this image will also allow to more precisely answer the question what is the role of state and what kind of social security is precisely needed at each of these stages.

The statistics suggest that 1/3 of young European (till age of 30) move to live with partners, however they are reluctant to undertake any actions in order to legalise these relationships.

Such a development is indeed an interesting element for the social psychology analyses. The question that could be here posed is if this seeking informality is the case only as far as private sphere of love and sexual relationships is concerned, or if this is a general tendency. Another two would be: is therefore the society more open as far as its cultural moral code is concerned only in regards to the couples or in general? Is the lack of interest in legalising the bound an issue connected with legally stating to be taking a responsibility for another human being and thus forming a small community subsequently? If a proceeding de-formalisation was a phenomena, then surely once it is related to the issue of social responsibility then it could be one of the explanations why also the formalised party membership, among the others, is no longer the formula that young people find attractive (see point 2 of this note). If such a conclusion was to be drawn, then one would have to seriously elaborate on the proposal of the ‘new opening’ in a sense of keeping the party broadly engaging not only members, but also sympathisers and potential groups of interests.

The “no hurry” phenomena and the fact that the demography foresees the progressing of the process of ageing of our population are also related to the fact that young women give birth for the first time relatively later than their mothers. The average age for young European women to bare the first child is 25 years old. The countries in which that happens on average when women are 30 years old are Germany, Spain and the UK.

Changing social strata should influence the way of thinking about family life. First of all, because unlike in the previous generations, it is less and less the case that grandparents can take care of their grandchildren. It is not only the question that women become mothers later, but also women become grandmothers later and thus may find it more challenging to look after their grandchildren. If the changes in the labour law are to be implemented then additionally they will work longer. Furthermore, migration and free movement of people within the European labour market make the different generations within the same family live far from one another. So their contacts are periodical. This scraps the possibility of i.e. grandparents providing care and moreover informal education to their grandchildren on the daily bases. This conclusion should be heavily influencing the socialist views on i.e. the childcare provision, as also in general on the process of socialisation (and thus the programme for the formal education, accessibility to an informal one and to the leisure time activities). This is a question on what kind of ties we want people to uphold among themselves in the future.

The “no hurry” generation phenomena can also be comprehended as not only not taking next steps in life, but as not being able to take them. 20% (so almost 20 millions) of young Europeans live at the risk of poverty. Additionally the unemployment rates among young people of age 15 – 24 rose in last year by 4% and now reached 18,9%. Therefore it must be said that the young people are more affected by unemployment than their parents.

Most of the young people active on the labour market are employees, not employers. Only 4% of people 15-24 and 9% of 25 - 29 are self employed. The characters of the contracts differentiate. 37% of the young people age 15 – 24 are employed on temporary positions, which un-fixed terms they accept due to lack of choice. 65% in the age of 25-29 enjoy fixed term contacts. The statistics on internships, especially the unpaid ones, are missing (please see datas of Generation P). 51% of the young people between 15 and 24 work on Saturdays. Majority tend to work in a-typical working hours schemes.

No wonder then that only 47% of young people only expect a better life. It is the first time in the after the war history that young generation expects to face a future that will be worse than the one of their parents.

The fact that so many young people live in or on the edge of poverty is what social democrats need to address. This is what determines their opportunities and hence the possibility to develop oneself while contributing to a sustainable development of a society. *Equality is better for everyone* argue Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in their recent publication, which many social democrats tend to agree with primarily while speaking of “universal reciprocity” relation between the state and the citizen. Such a relation will not be possible if these figures remain as they are. And if it is so, the attempts of social democrats to redefine the role of state, defend and modernise welfare state and through all that convince people to trust in politics will be exercise done in vain.

The ultimate poverty, the precarious working conditions and lack of perspectives for improvement are surely influencing the way people feel about the world and the future. The apathy, the feeling of being abandoned and left alone with their problems, can induce either lethargy or aggression. The ‘feeling

alone' can also be read as a side effect of general progressing individualism and disappearance of the community ties within the society, as well. In the first case, people tend not to undertake any activism (especially not a partisan one), and in the second they wish to be able to blame someone for the situation they are in – what makes them vulnerable to the populist or extremist propaganda. Re-establishing the missing link between precisely this group, which cannot and will not in sensu largo emancipate itself on its own, should be the mission of social democrats. It must be however in accordance to a well thought socialist agenda – not the 'all youth agenda', which could be found among any national youth council materials. Perhaps a debate on how to do that, with participation of both trade unions (especially their youth officers) and the socialist youth organizations could be a way to do so.

The numbers do not disclose how many young Europeans remain in a cycle of unpaid internships. It is proven however that a majority of young Europeans are unwillingly in temporary employment. This surely defines their life style, their life time decisions (such as getting children) and their economic possibilities (such as seeking a mortgage to afford a home of their own). The understanding that economic conditions unfairly heavily influence life opportunities has been for years the most basic socialist way of understanding the society and social mobility. The increasing poverty among young people and the non-promising employment perspectives should make social democrats redefine its views on the construction on the labour market. A situation in which the young generation keen to work is pushed aside on one side, and on the other the oldest one is told to work longer in order to balance the economy is a paradox that must be addressed.

Last but not least, the numbers that indicate on how many self-employed young people there are in Europe should also be looked into by social democrats. In eagerness to address and win the support of the SMEs (small and medium enterprises), social democracy seem to overlook that at least for two groups it is more difficult, if not impossible to get a credit to start their own enterprise: women and young people. If social democrats were to be standing on the principle that creativity and its subsequent productivity is what they wish to encourage, the aspect on how to enable young people to set up their own business must be a core of the debate. This discussion, especially as far as financial support provision is concerned, shall be integral with the debate on the tuition fees for education – which determine the debts with which young people primarily by now enter the labour markets as such.

59% of the young people of 18 years old are exclusively in education. The rate decreases (as more and more enter the labour market) with age – only 37% of young people in the age group 15 - 24 work and study in comparison with 75% of those, who are 25 – 29 years old and continue their education. Additionally, the participation in education tends to decline after the young European graduate from the compulsory education. It is still above 80%, nevertheless. 90% of learners speak at least one foreign language, however in the same time one has to underline that this is not a tendency that is accurate for the learners in vocational training. There seem also to be a new approach towards the education. Young people feel a strong competition within their age group on one side and on the other, they are aware that there is no longer a profession or job for life. This is why they see education as a sort of an investment that would secure for them not so much a job, as rather an employment.

These figures are extremely important, while considering the vision of a knowledge based society. It seems that the new generation falls more and more into a philosophy according to which education is 'an investment', a way of 'generating capital' in the future. It would be unwise to overlook that conclusion, as this is the most living proof of the fact that capitalism is not just ruling the markets, but in the meantime gained people's hearts and minds. This affects the way people see the mission of education, prioritising its utilitarian value and possibly neglecting the importance of its socialising tasks. The additional danger is therefore a commercialisation of education, which could lead to treating both the schooling and the research as 'goods that need to be traded'. It seems therefore necessary for social democracy to rethink its concept of education, emphasise that learning is about socialising, emancipating and equipping individuals and the society as a whole for the future. A challenge to introduce this concept into a social discourse will not be a small one.

Additionally, what relates education, especially the higher education, with economy is the fact that more and more the tuition fees are being demanded for studies. Young people, who wish to pursue studies, in growing number of cases need to apply for a credit / students' loans in order to be able to finance it. This is how they enter an unfriendly labour market already indebted, which is a heavy burden and surely influence the choices as far as the employment and possibilities of high risk self-employment are concerned. Additionally despite the measures on the quality of education that Europe introduces (Bologna process), there still is no common ground as far as the concept of 'education free of charge' and national strategies of 'building the knowledge society' are concerned. This situation seem not to match therefore the debates the socialists start on Ivy League of European schools etc. (see Par Nuder report "Making Europe Nobel Laureates in Education" done for FEPS in 2009). The conclusion therefore is that the question on financing education must be brought back to a debate on the European Model and on the concept of welfare state. If socialist decide that the higher education is not to be free of charge, which what while being in some governments they did, it must be well explained both as in relations to the key values and as far as the actual opportunities for young people are concerned. Without such a major and difficult debate it is hard to wonder why young people facing a perspective of long term debt or no further education doubt in social democratic agendas.

Generally (90%) young Europeans consider themselves healthy. This is despite the fact that the amount of people affected with HIV has grown, as also did the proportion of smokers. The problems of obesity can also be widely seen with the European populations. The health is surely also connected with the way of organizing the free time. The young people today spend relatively less time on the leisure activities. Especially participation in the sport activities decreased. In terms of recreation, only 27% of men and 19% of women in age group 16 – 29 took part in such a group.

Sports does not constitute a serious point within a socialist agenda. This should be reconsidered. First of all, because it is a way of organizing life within the community, giving people a possibility to meet within same age group and spend time doing things together. A participation in a local sport football team, to give an example, allows people to get to know each other on one side, and also creates within their mind a skill to see oneself as a member of a team – a team player. Regular trainings demand discipline and

competition between the teams encourage positive rivalry in a spirit of fair play. That transformed into an everyday life makes an important contribution to a life of an individual and of a community. Secondly, the provision of sport for all the age groups enhance the healthy condition of the people. This affects their ability to study, work and look after themselves while retired. Sports should therefore be seen as a factor influencing the health and hence health care. This is an extremely relevant point for social democrats. Thirdly, it is said that sports as a way to organize young people's free time could be a way of taking them "out from the streets". This expression tends to be reflected in studies that state that in a way it could influence the rise of criminality. With rising poverty (which can cause rise criminality) among young people this point is worth looking into.

2) Young people and politics in general

Politicians believe that politics is a way to change the reality. This seem not to be shared as a feeling by the young people in Europe. The World Values Survey states that $\frac{3}{4}$ of young people say that politics is not important to them. Eurostat adds that within the new generation only 26% of people age 16 – 24 are interested in politics. The group is dominated by men.

Additionally, the limited trust in politicians, which is one of the causes of what has been widely known as a democratic deficit is a fact. 31% of young people in Europe trust in politicians (which is less than a half that declare their faith in police, to give a comparison). The trust in the political institutions appears to be higher, which is 63% for the European Parliament. The most trustworthy seems to be the United Nations – which 71% of young Europeans trust.

Only 4% of young people (15 – 30) have participated in the activities of political parties or trade unions. The rates of participation are higher for the more educated groups. This seems awkward, especially that some figures indicate as many as 16% of them being party members. The statistic looks better for the public debates, in which 30% participated of them have taken part. 16% joining the political parties. Trust in politicians – 31%, police 76%, EP – 63%, UN 71%.

Political participation is according to some theories linked with voluntary organizations. If that was so, it is interesting to quote that only 2% of young Europeans aged 15 – 30 volunteer.

These numbers lead to several reflections. First of all, it seems that the gap between the political class and the society is widening. Electoral behaviour of the population reflected in the decreasing turnout by the polling stations would be an additional aspect to support this statement. It seems that even the examples that could be considered as inspiring for young people to enter politics, such as recent campaign of President Barack Obama, remain not to be enough. As long as the situation remains one must pose a question on legitimacy and representation, and also therefore of the state of contemporary democracy.

What is more is the question of the sense of politics itself. In order to inspire young people, as it did in the times of the war in Vietnam or in 1968, it must be about change and hope. Young people are the ones who are more likely to risk and involve in a struggle by nature. Which is why, if social democrats wish to gain their enthusiasm it must turn to a positive, constructive agenda – rather than a bureaucratic, defensive one – against the globalisation, against terrorism. Plus it must be about a real substance. One of the failures of having communicated Europe is that it is to be for young people a matter of cheap travelling, preferential roaming tariffs or multiculturalism perceived as a chance to eat in a ‘foreign cuisine’ restaurant. This seem to be so much away, from what young people may truly seek – seeing that so many of them believe in the UN, an organizations social democrats mostly speak in the context ‘too vague, need to reform”. Perhaps addressing the traditional values, such as peace and internationalism in their new contemporary meaning would be a way to attract young people back, to prove that there is a civilisation and historical sense in politics.

Secondly, the question of individual involvement in politics. In the chapter above, the economic circumstances that influence the way the young generation look at the future were broadly analysed. It is hard to wonder that people stacked in precarious job(s) and/or between education that became a product of service and the jobs to be able to afford to follow one, find neither time nor energy to additionally involve themselves in politics. What is more, since politics became more and more a profession (instead of being a passion) for so many, it is also not to be seen as a surprise that people with other jobs already would not follow the path. As for young people themselves, once could try to argue that interest in politics come with age. It could however be also contradicted by pointing out that there are no comprehensive recruitment, participation and promotion procedures within the parties.

This has to be especially taken into consideration by social democrats. A young person entering currently any of the socialist parties headquarters may be either turned to a youth organization or to the local section. There in majority of cases the obligations evolve around leafleting while campaigning. The membership does not seem to clearly outline neither privileges nor absolute obligations. The primary sense of the membership within the social democratic party, which was to educate and emancipate, which served to implement the slogans ‘together we are stronger’ has been somewhat lost. De Tocqueville claimed, to quote another classics, that involvement in organizations mean that people come in contact with public issues and develop skills and knowledge, connect with political actors. Since this does not seem the case nowadays, the social democrats must realise this as a challenge. Redefining the party membership, revitalising its educational and socialising dimension would surely constitute a step in answering what is the actual meaning and use of contemporary civic and political rights of an individual. What is more, the young generation that may now be entering political parties shall not follow the patterns of professional politics that are so much rejected by the voters.

Additionally, in the chapter one there has been much said about the informality of the interpersonal relations. If to link that with two other, semi-interdependent figures as decreasing of the partisan membership and the declining turnout, one has to seek the new ways to overcome it. The philosophy of the ‘new opening’ may be the answer, but that would mean a great organizational reform in a spirit to move from centralised and strongly formalised party structures back to a spirit of what was once known

as a movement. It could also induce a cultural revolution and create a specific, pluralistic new cultural identity of the movement. In particular this point in the light of tendencies shown by young people shall be reflected by the parties upon in cooperation with the affiliated political youth and students' organizations. The mission and the significance of these should also be redefined.

The previous paragraphs argued for more opened, participatory and personalised culture. This will influence how the politics is communicated and hence comprehended. That shall remain also linked with the debate on the usage of new media and if new media could replace the old communication (such as tv, radio). The tendency of social democrats is to be enthusiastic about that, especially that most of the parties experienced hostility if not aggression from the well established media (to take the last UK's elections as an example). Before however stating that this is the absolute way ahead, one has to take the statistical truth into account. It is true that 80% of the internet users use it to communicate, but only 20% of the young internet users use it to look at official information or follow politics. Politics within internet is also consider by young people as simplified, especially before the elections when it seem to be enough to answer few questions to receive a generated answer which politician matches our views. Which is why the answer is not so much about how to be a better facebooker, but how to use this as a supplement to a larger mission on how to return to an everyday people's discourse.

The issue of the new media shall also be analysed further as a certain social phenomena that may further influence the current generation. The vast majority use internet to communicate, what pose a question what is that is being communicated and with what aim. Twitter, for example, gives an opportunity to update the circle of your friends and thus their friends about the thoughts or events one is experiencing. The need to share these is not only considered natural and the activity itself trendy. There are no limits in terms of privacy and intimacy, except the ones the author of the tweet decides upon themselves. Additionally, thanks to the internet one can 'engage' in unlimited amount of debates, actions, protests etc. Most of these remain forever in cyberspace, but surely a possibility to support an initiative or join a group gives a 'such a good feeling'. Last but not least, what is very new about this form of participation is that one can freely chose how she or he appears, possibly entirely reinventing its personality and its life. All these points lead to a conclusion that social democracy must analyse more in-depth the internet communication phenomena, approaching that on at least four level: ideological (i.e. what does democracy mean in this new digital era? What is the individual freedom, once you can be followed wherever you go?), sociological (how does group life on a forum relate to the theories of progressing individualism?), political (can possibly an involvement in a party life be a solely and only an e-involvement?) and communication (how to gain a say in an e-social discourse?). This debate shall primarily be with an involvement of the young generation, as the ones who already today define partially their social and political participation via a mouse click.

3) Young people and social democracy – final recommendations

In the light of the conclusions made above, one could wish to repeat 10 observations on what the social democrats across Europe could do to attract and gain the support among the younger generation.

1. Re-establish a meaning of politics as struggle to implement a significant vision for the future. Social democratic agenda must be a brave prospect of realistic opportunities and positive development.
2. Redefine the social democratic values in a spirit of their contemporary understanding. The passion for them may inspire others.
3. Design a vision with which a young generation can identify themselves with. Be therefore clear how you see different chapters and lengths of these of a human life (education, work, pension). This is a key to re-design also the welfare state. Seek to tackle the misery of poverty and precarious employment.
4. Make sure that a language social democracy uses to speak about the issues, as also the perception of these, such as understanding what education is, is distinctive and the one young people can identify themselves with.
5. Make the policy agenda with and for young people. But not as ‘young people’ added for political correctness somewhere after all the other possibly discriminated or impoverished groups. And not as a “pan-youth”, instead of a socialist agenda. A socialist youth agenda can be ‘trendy’.
6. Reform the party organization to make it open, to recreate the movement. One can support as a sympathizer.
7. Re-think the activities agenda of a party – the informal setting may attract many eventual supporters among young people. No decent leisure time activity is ‘non’- social democratic one.
8. Examine and perhaps redefine the role of the political youth organizations. Seek a new alliance with the students organizations.
9. Bring back the socialising and educational dimension of the partisan membership. Think about partisanship as indicative in micro scale of what the modern citizenship in macro scale is.
10. Use new media as a tool to communicate, but do not forget about the personalised relations and inter-personal dialogue as connected, but still not dependent.