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The Future of Youth in Europe and Israel: Social Exclusion and the Quality of Democracy

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Israeli Perspective:

The Young population is the driving force that contributes to the growth of the Israeli economy in various aspects: economic, educational, social, academic and public. The State of Israel is characterized by a high proportion of young people in relation to the European countries.

A vast share of the younger population in Israel feels that the state has failed in ensuring their future; despite having paid their dues, fulfilled their civic duties and having chosen the desired professional and academic path – their financial horizon is obscure. Young people in Europe also undergo significant challenges, more about that later, and it was therefore decided to hold a seminar of the IEPN in Warsaw on "The Future of Youth in Europe and Israel", in order to identify these challenges and propose policy measures to help young people get through them.

The most prominent manifestation of the hardships that befall youths and the depreciation in their real salaries (as is with most of Israel's population) is the constant and steep rise in real-estate prices. In addition, many of the academic student population in Israel face the difficulties of financing their schooling and living and finding relevant and profitable jobs, having completed their studies. While many European countries see an even share, or even higher, electing between common academic trajectory and vocational training, in Israel vocational training entices a negligible portion. Most of the population deems professional education as unwanted, due to and resulting in a lack of quality professional schools.

A study published by the Research Department of the Bank of Israel on April 2014 suggests that young working families have a low income in relation to their average income over their lives and have high expenditures. Therefore, it is acceptable in most European countries to help such families through tax benefits, child allowances, subsidized services and benefits. The assistance to young working families in Israel is significantly lower than the common level in other European countries. Therefore, the study authors recommend that, according to a simulation of increasing benefits to average families with young children up to the common level in the OECD countries, while raising tax rates for older families. This balanced budget policy, and with time including the individual income as well, can significantly increase the utility of the population, thanks to consumption smoothing over the life cycle of the family.

The services provided to the youth originate from several organizations that are uncoordinated and operate in a limited fashion, addressing specific and sectorial issues. In addition, the Israeli governments through the years have not created an encompassing policy to aid youths and underprivileged groups, especially in regards of housing initiatives or reducing the volatility of market prices.

Economic horizon for young people: During the social protests of summer 2011, the young public cried out against the high cost of living, especially housing prices, and called for a change of priorities. Since the fall of 2013, the public discourse began to engage the phenomenon of emigration of many young Israelis from the country in pursuit of economic opportunities and better living conditions.

According to a survey conducted at the youth centers by the JDC in 2010, it is apparent that large segments



of young people feel that the state does not care enough about their future. Even though they follow the path expected of them; contributing to the state through military / national service and acquiring higher education, their economic horizon remains unclear.

European Perspective:

The European elections of May 2014 witnessed an unprecedented rise of votes cast for anti-integration and right-wing parties in almost all member states. But that wasn't a snapshot. In the years prior to the elections, Europeans faced manifold tests of solidarity – and often failed to deliver. This is true for anti-immigration and anti-minority sentiments that are documented across Europe, be it against refugees from abroad or against European citizens who are minorities such as Muslims, Jews, or Sinti and Roma. But solidarity is tested too between the North and the South of Europe. Nowhere has this been more evident than in relation to the Euro-crisis in which EU bodies and governments in the Northern part of the Euro-Zone, in particular Europe's economic and political powerhouse Germany, demanded from mainly Southern European governments in Athens, Lisbon, Madrid, and Rome harsh austerity measures. Many in the South understood that their economies somehow had to adjust, but they expected more solidarity from the North, not only in fiscal terms. It appears that the North has repeatedly addressed people and governments in the EU's Mediterranean regions on that account. The youth in Europe's South has been particularly affected by these developments. Youth unemployment rose sharply between 2007 and 2013, from 23 to almost 60 percent in Greece, from 17 to almost 40 percent in Portugal and from 18 to more than 55 percent in Spain. The situation is even worse when employment figures come into play. While in 2007 24 percent of Greece's young population (aged 15-24) was employed, in 2013 only half of that number was active in the job market. In Spain this

figure dropped from 39 to 17 percent, whereas in Italy it declined from 25 to 16 percent (see Mitchell 2014). The good news in what appears an economic tunnel of darkness is that notwithstanding this bleak outlook young Europeans are not turning in masses to right-wing parties offering easy (and morally repugnant) solutions to complex problems. However, the rise of these parties is linked to a general sense of crisis that also figures in these dramatic changes in the situation of youth in Europe, in particular the Union's South. It is against this background that the IEPN has organized a seminar in Warsaw at which the situation of Youth in Europe and Israel was scrutinized from a comparative perspective. While Poland and Central and Eastern Europe in general have suffered less from the economic crisis youth unemployment is a major problem there too (see Polakowski 2013) as is the rise of right-wing movements, including their ascending to government positions as in Hungary.

The meeting in Warsaw, which was held on the 2nd and 3rd of July, was organized jointly by IEPN, the Warsaw Office of the FES and the Warsaw-based Center for International Relations and brought together Europeans – researchers, young social activists, and decision-makers - from Poland as well as the Union's North and South which addressed, jointly with delegates from Israel the inter-linkages between these socio-economic and political challenges brought upon by economic crises, social exclusion and rise of right-wing extremism.

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The 2011 Protest Campaign – a retrospective balance sheet

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On July 14, 2014, the French nation, and many other people around the globe, has joyfully celebrated the 225th anniversary of the French revolution. On the very same date, some Israelis and the media have marked, with mixed feelings, the third anniversary of the outbreak of the socio-economic discontentment also known as the "Tents Protest". On July 14, 2011 a seething undercurrent of socio-economic dissatisfaction erupted to the surface in Israel taking the shape of an unprecedented grassroots street protest campaign.

Obviously the two events are not comparable in significance, magnitude and consequences. The French revolution changed the way people are governed worldwide while the Israeli protest of summer 2011 left only a few scratches on the public agenda of a small country while - at least thus far - the political superstructure remains pretty much intact. Yet it is appropriate to mention the two events in the same breath because the legacy of the former shaped, in some important respects, the latter's agenda and expectations. It is not by chance that July 14th, not the day before or the day after, was the date selected by the initiator of the endeavor, a young middle-class woman, a film editor in her late twenties, to put out a call via Facebook to friends and colleagues in the media to join her in the tent she put up on Rothschild Boulevard, one of the main high-streets of Tel Aviv in protest against the cost of housing (only later on was the campaign's agenda expanded to include other social and economic problems).

Indeed, it was not only the French revolution which served as the spiritual role model for this broad Israeli

anti-government campaign. Events in other countries also served as role models. After a number of years in which protest seemed to have lost its allure and efficacy worldwide, the end of the first decade of the 2000s saw massive outbreaks of social unrest in the US, Spain, Greece and other places, including those right around the corner from Tel Aviv, in Cairo's Tahrir Square and in other Arab countries, which often resulted in the autocratic regimes being toppled. In each country the reasons and triggers for the upsurge in people's discontent was somewhat different. However the common thread between all these endeavors can be traced back to the French Revolution which gave birth and meaning to the new notion of citizenship and invested it with a list of rights (as well as duties). It also gave credence to initiating a grassroots revolt against legitimate rulers who had not proven themselves accountable and attentive to the sovereign body – the people. Admittedly, neither the French revolution nor the Egyptian Tahrir Square uprising were openly acknowledged in 2011 Israel as relevant precedents; nevertheless their democratic legacy served as a 'cognitive frame' for the local endeavor discussed hereafter.

As mentioned briefly above, in retrospect, it appears that the achievements of the 2011 Israeli protest were limited, although not as minimal as some disappointed participants and supporters as well as some critics often claim. This paper asserts that the campaign was not successful on three planes: in maintaining momentum, in bridging class, ideological and ethnic conflicting interests, and in establishing a significant and sustainable challenge to dominant governmental quasi-neoliberal ideology and policies. At the same time, it succeeded significantly more than it is getting credit for on two levels which are critical for the future of Israeli democracy: first, it helped



transform the public priority scale so that, now, social and economic issues are at the top, replacing the formerly dominant security-military ones. Second, it promoted and gave voice to the grassroots demand for greater transparency and accountability on the part of the government. The rest of this paper will elaborate on this balance sheet.

Before the details of the above appraisal are addressed at length, it is important to provide background information for those who are not very familiar with the Israeli case:

The economic aspect: When the protest campaign broke out, Israel's national macro-economic indicators were (and still are) impressively positive. According to the regular indicators, the Israeli economy was doing well while other developed and developing countries where protest had gained momentum at the same time were struggling with the dismal economic consequences of the post-2008 meltdown. For example, the level of unemployment in Israel was only about 7%, the national deficit was reasonable by common standards, and the GNP per capita was up to around \$31,000. The national growth rate of the economy was also promising: over 4.5%. And yet, inequality and income gaps had become more and more apparent and the sense of relative deprivation had deepened. The latter was fueled by growing awareness - mainly amongst middle-class, secular, urban, educated and employed Israelis in their late 20s, 30s and early 40s - that not only had the cost of living become unbearably higher than their incomes, but that their prospects of closing this gap in the foreseeable future were minimal. The most burning issues were then housing costs, gas, and food (the increased price of the much consumed common cottage cheese turned symbolically into one of the main arenas of conflict). These young people, who, in due course, consisted the backbone of the various protest events, realized that, for the first time in the state's relatively short history, as an age cohort they would do worse economically than their parents'

generation.¹ Thus, for example, the chances of buying an apartment in the central part of the country for the members of the middle-class younger generation were close to nil while almost all members of their parents' generation had "made" it. The discrepancy between the objective positive macro indicators which were presented by the government as evidence for its successful policies, and the subjective sense of facing an economic dead-end was the main catalyst for the protest's eruption.

The cognitive aspect: Despite the deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and the prevalent perception that peace was nowhere to be seen on the horizon, the sense was that national security was in good shape. In other words, the external military threats were widely considered to be "under control": the second Palestinian intifada was over and, because of the turmoil of the Arab Spring, the neighboring countries were much more preoccupied by their domestic affairs than by Israel's existence or by the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories. In other words, whereas in times of active external conflict Israelis do not "allow themselves" to focus on domestic problems, the current situation provided a window of opportunity for the socio-economic issues to be brought to the fore. In social movement theories such a situation is described as an "open structure of political opportunities".

The political aspect: While on the cognitive level the structure of political opportunities was relatively open, it was far less so on the political level where there was no real opposition - from the left or the right - to the incumbent government, headed by Netanyahu and the Likud party. It should be remembered that in 2011 the Israeli left was already in shambles in terms of its public appeal and could hardly offer any support to the protest campaign without "contaminating" its

¹ Zeev Rosenhek & Michael Shalev (2013). The political economy of Israel's 'social justice' protests: a class and generational analysis. *Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2013.851405>




image. The center parties indeed aspired to replace the government; however they were very careful not to confront the wealthier segments of society head on and therefore refrained from committing themselves to the protest's goals. The protest leaders, it should be mentioned here, were very careful (some would argue - too careful) to define their endeavor as apolitical and acted – as it were – outside of the political arena.

Against this background the protest balance sheet will be now presented.

Downsides

The mixed feelings with which the protest is recalled are the result of the fact that it did not meet the expectations of its participants and supporters in three very important respects:

Short life-span

Protest waves are known for their short life span. In most cases they come and go in days, weeks or, at most, months. Sometimes they reappear a few months or several years later. This is why certain social movement analysts compare their behavior pattern to a whale swimming – up and down the surface of the sea. Only if they develop a clear agenda and strategic blueprint and mobilize the critical resources and are not intercepted immediately by the state, are they able to survive longer. The 2011 Israeli protest did not meet these minimal thresholds. Summer in Israel is a good season for spending time outdoors discussing matters of public interest and for organizing massive street rallies. This turned out to be even more tempting when the Tel Aviv municipality provided the tent area with heavy-duty cleaning services, the neighbors let the tent dwellers take showers in their nearby apartments, restaurants sent them large quantities of free food and family members and friends stopped by to support the cause. In a way then, it was the (too) convenient circumstances that prevented the protest from experiencing the friction with its surroundings

which is necessary in order to keep it going. After two months, the summer was drawing to a close, the Jewish high holidays were approaching, the academic year started and people just packed up and went back home. This withdrawal was made easier by the fact that the government appointed a commission to examine the issues raised by the protestors and to propose a corrective agenda which would address the socio-economic grievances raised by them. Another reason for the campaign's short life span was the fact that its leaders' inner circle was crushed to pieces: some of them became very despondent and returned to their everyday lives. Others radicalized their worldviews and decided to invest their energies in more blatantly anti-government activities. Others joined mainstream parties and turned into professional politicians. With no leaders and few followers around, it is clear why the campaign dissipated for all practical purposes, leaving behind a bitter taste.

Internal conflicts

The point of departure of the 2011 protest was that it was a campaign of "the people against the government". Based on this position, efforts were made to create comprehensive grassroots solidarity or at least an agreed-upon list of demands. However, in a few weeks it became clear that the socio-economic interests of various public sectors which were allegedly represented by the campaign were far from complementary. For example, the Jewish Israeli protestors defined their interests and goals in an essentially different way than Israeli Arabs who felt unwelcome. Similar conflicts of interest developed between the so-called (Jewish) center and periphery, between the middle class and the blue collar workers, between those settlers who were interested in joining the lines and the protest leaders who, on an individual level, belonged to the political left although they acted as though this was an apolitical game and so on. A generation gap also became apparent between the middle-aged members of the middle class who



already owned apartments and wished to profit from their investment and the generation of their children, the renters, who depicted them as greedy. In a short while then it turned out that more than being “the people against the government” the real conflict was among the people. With a minimal solidarity base and few shared interests, the chances for any campaign to take off were meager, and this one was no exception.

Ideological ambiguity

In their effort to bring as many possible people on board, the young and inexperienced leaders of the campaign tried to make do with focusing on the government deficiencies alone without suggesting any solutions for the weighty economic dilemmas which they themselves were raising. “We are not experts, we only raise the questions and point out the problems” they maintained more than once – insisting that this was a new era with new rules of the game. Efforts by more experienced, often older activists and experts to persuade them that such a posture was strategically self-defeating fell on deaf ears.

Indeed, the desire to be acknowledged as apolitical and the refusal to offer detailed solutions to the problems they raised were not very convincing and left much room for external interpretation. Thus, their social rhetoric looked “pinkish” in the eyes of many, particularly as the endeavor was hailed and supported by many intellectuals and academics known for their socialist ideology. Once the protest was tainted with this political color, large parts of the Israeli public became alienated from it, and so were, of course, those whose interests would have been jeopardized if the protest goals had been achieved, from the very rich oligarchs to the middle-class owners of one or two rented apartments. On the other hand, the radical left-wing activists saw the ambiguous worldview put forward by the protest leaders as an indication of their lack of commitment and perhaps even as a cover-up for a bourgeois mentality. Either way, the

professed ideological ambiguity boomeranged and proved counter-productive at the end of the day.

The above three drawbacks notwithstanding, the 2011 protest had some significant achievements, which have significantly improved Israeli democracy.


Achievements

Reviewing the national priority scale

Involved since its independence in a protracted conflict, the military/security-related issues have always been Israel’s top priority. As various research projects have shown, in certain respects the Israeli public is constantly “rallying around the flag.” The siege mentality of both the nation’s leaders and the public has limited the ability to direct national attention to other matters. The same goes for the budget allocation which has been heavily subjugated to security needs. Therefore, previous efforts by socially oriented actors from within or from outside the political establishment to divert more attention or more resources so as to reduce the widening socio-economic gap have failed miserably.

One of the main demands of the 2011 protest rallies was to cater more to the economic needs of the people, even if this was at the expense of the security budgets. The public was extremely attentive to and supportive of these demands: a month after the campaign started, 78% of Israeli-Jewish respondents in a public opinion survey already agreed that a financial reallocation in favor of the social issues should be made and 53% agreed that money should be taken out of the security budget for that purpose.² Despite the dissipation of the protest after only 2 months, this new civic orientation has proved long-lasting. Almost three years later, in April 2014, 47% of Israeli-Jewish respondents mentioned reduction of the socio-economic gaps as the main target for the government to pursue and another 21% noted

² August 2011 Peace index Survey, <http://www.peaceindex.org/newsletterEng.aspx?year=2011&month=8>



that the creation of affordable housing solutions was a main goal (together this totaled 68%). Only 10% topped their list with the strengthening of Israel's military capabilities and another 9% mentioned first reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians (altogether 19%).³

This new set of priorities was clearly manifested in the agenda for the 2013 national elections in which economy stood front and center. Another indication was the unexpected electoral achievements of two parties which devoted much attention in their election publicity to the economic and social issues directly addressing the concerns of younger middle class voters: the new, secular center party Yesh Atid (There is a Future) and the religious, right wing yet socially and economically oriented Habayit HaYehudi (Jewish Home) party. In addition, in the wake of the protest and in line with its young spirit, the average age of Israeli parliamentarians dropped after the elections; several leaders of the protest campaign were themselves elected Members of Knesset, thus politically mainstreaming the protest demands. Last but not least, there are empirical indications that political involvement of the younger age cohorts in both national and local politics and in social activism increased significantly in the wake of the 2011 experience.

Promoting transparency and accountability

The word accountability does not have a Hebrew equivalent. Some argue that this linguistic lacuna reflects a democratic deficiency in the national political culture – the elected representatives, let alone nominated office holders, simply do not feel accountable to their constituencies. Admittedly, for years the public accepted this state of affairs as a given. The present electoral system in which the

entire country is one district contributed significantly to this deficiency. As mentioned above, the protest leaders did not call for a structural change in the system. However they often addressed the urgent need for accountability and transparency and democratic values. This awareness came out at first in a rather naïve way when several central figures, on being invited to meet Prime Minister Netanyahu, demanded that the discussion be broadcast in real time. This demand was widely mocked at the time by experts, journalists and politicians and was indeed declined by the Prime Minister's office. However, this instigated a serious debate about the democratic right of the people to be informed about decision-making processes and to get open access to various official data. And indeed, subsequently, various steps have been taken in that direction, including the establishment of the Open Knesset workshop⁴ and the government's formal decision to join the Open Government International Initiative.


In addition the demand for accountability and transparency was supported by the media channels which gave it very positive coverage. The alliance with the media helped to spread these notions and to integrate them into the public discourse. As a result, in recent years, Israel has been witnessing an avalanche of exposures of unacceptable connections between politicians and political bodies and various corporations and tycoons, which often end up in court.

Some conclusions

The 2011 protest did not succeed in bringing about the social and economic change it aspired to. The painful descent from the euphoria of mid-July 2011 to the bitter disappointment of mid-September and after indeed left behind a somewhat discouraging legacy regarding the ability of grassroots campaigns

³ April 2014 peace Index Survey
http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num=274&monthname=April#.U579l_m5xqU

⁴ <http://www.hasadna.org.il/en/our-projects/open-knesset/>



to transform the political system. However, in retrospect, it appears in fact that, in the wake of the campaign several important changes for the better were introduced into the Israeli democratic culture: it injected new blood and new ideas into the national political discourse, legitimized a change in the national priorities' scale and politicized new and

younger people. It also created an unprecedented alliance between the media and social activists, and forced the government to open up to wider and deeper public scrutiny. Admittedly, this is not enough, but it certainly brought Israeli democracy to a better place and may serve in the future as a springboard for further improvements.

Youth in Europe (and Beyond) – Between Pragmatism and Volatility

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Every diagnosis of the situation of young people in Europe and ensuing advice on youth policy must start with a long disclaimer about what can and what cannot be said about a social form so complex as a 'generation'. Every age cohort is characterized by a high degree of variety. Things like value attitudes, political views, leisure activities, or fashion preferences are not abstract categories of social scientific analysis, but refer to a real variety experienced in the life situation of (young) people. Every attempt to characterize a generation by applying a single term to it (such as 'generation Y', the 'generation of 68' etc.) necessarily reduces this variety and distracts from a significant – often the majority – part of a generation whose life situation is not covered by such a characterization. Still: using a specific term to describe a generation usually does identify some characteristics by which it first and foremost can be distinguished from preceding generations. Whether this distinction (and the ensuing term applied) primarily takes place in the areas of values, of political opinion or ideology, or of cultural expression is another issue. But it is these specific markers of distinction together with the political, economic, and social context of a specific time which combines into the 'feel' of a generation. If the concept of a 'generation' already proves difficult

if used for more specific analytical purposes due to the variety of life situations and life courses behind it, diagnoses about 'youth' across more than one country get invariably more complex. Despite many similarities, significant differences in the gestalt of generations of the same age in different countries persist, even if the view here is not a global one but one limited to a 'Western' world broadly conceived. Much of the difficulty in assessing the overall situation of young people in Europe and in trying to identify commonalities and differences between country-specific 'generations', which in themselves are quite amorphous shapes, stems from the persistent lack of large-scale youth surveys and studies which would provide repeated in-depth studies on the situation of young people across a range of countries. Nonetheless, there are features which are shared by young people across countries, and some in which they are vastly different. The present short contribution develops an argument around this difference. It is not a contribution which provides numbers and trends in order to come up with the identification of highly specific problem constellations and their possible solutions within a single or in a number of countries. Rather, it is a contribution which seeks to reflect on the possibilities and the limits of any kind of youth policy in that it seeks to assess the most appropriate frame of reference for any such policy.

Commonalities: individualization of life courses and transnational (sub-)cultures

The individualization of life courses and the difficulty to plan the status passage from adolescence to adulthood, as well as the fact that this passage nowadays takes place anywhere between the age of 20 and the mid- to late 30s is a common defining feature of the young generation across many countries. Behind this individualization lies a range of developments which make these transitions more difficult to plan for (and easier to defer): young people spend much longer in educational systems than preceding generations; the transition into the labor market not only takes place later in the life course and in more diverse ways than in earlier generations; entering stable relationships or starting a family are decisions which are often deferred by young people, and particularly by young women, who are challenged with the task of accomplishing the feat of pursuing both a career path and founding a family.

These well-documented trends can be interpreted in a positive as well as in a negative way. The positive interpretation points to the flexibility which such a weak fixation of status passages offers to pragmatic young people. Rather than following the structure of life courses typical for previous generations, they attain a range of additional options which they can exert in order to fit their individual preferences. Pursuing and planning a career, or attempting flexible ways of balancing between 'work' and 'life', can be done in a variety of different ways if no longer constrained strongly by normative expectations and societal routines. The flipside of the coin is of course that those who would rather prefer well-defined and expectable status passages feel uncertain in view of the individual choices available to them. Striving to enter the labor market and founding a family relatively can result in impressions of underachievement and a somehow 'deficient' adolescence if those preferring such a transition into adulthood are prevented from

achieving it by structural constraints.

It should be noted that the individualization of life courses, the long drawn-out time span in the life course through which the transition to adulthood now occurs, and the flexibility in the timing of individual status passages is a process which is characteristic for basically all Western industrialized countries. Exceptions are due to status passages which are mandated externally. Although certainly not the sole or the main source of this development, the widespread abolition of mandatory military and civil service has removed one of the last firm markers of passage in addition to the end of secondary schooling in most countries (at least pertaining to the male part of the population; Israel in that respect provides a fascinating case for contemporary youth studies, as here arguably the status passage from adolescence to adulthood remains much more clear-cut precisely because of the very strong intermission in the life course).

While the 'commonality' of individualized life courses refers to greater variety between individuals, substantive commonalities between young people in different countries are to be found in the daily lives and on the (sub-) cultural level. Youth subcultures, fashion and music trends are mostly transnational in character. Modern technology, and particularly the use of social networks and the reliance on smartphones in the organization of everyday life, characterize the situation of young people everywhere in the industrialized world. Of course, these are phenomena which fully register through society as a whole. But whereas different trends in fashion or music, for example, always provided an expressive means for younger generations to distance itself from older generations, the impact of internet-based communication technology is arguably more profound as it marks a strong disjuncture between those who experience these technologies as new developments and those who are 'smartphone natives', so to speak.



Differences

References to notions such as 'global youth' refer to the commonalities noted above. They must not be misread to imply more than that, however. As much as differences remain strong within a young generation in one country, so do strong differences between countries. These differences became most obvious during the economic crisis over the last few years which provided a forceful reminder that the life situations of young people even between countries within the Eurozone differ strongly from each other and remain dependent on the economic performances of national economies. Youth unemployment rates which over many years remain at over twenty per cent in some countries may very well justify talks about a 'lost generation' and highlight the extreme contrast which persists between the prospects for young people in different countries to realize their specific future plans.

This observation also highlights that many of the structural and institutional conditions which enable (or restrain) the realization of plans for life among young people are conditioned nationally (or sometimes indeed to quite some degree sub-nationally). The structure and quality of educational systems, their ability (or inability) to mitigate inequality effects stemming from social background, as well the organization of the transition between the educational system and the labor market (vocational training system, tertiary education etc.) vary strongly between individual countries.

While economic hardship cannot simply be translated into political attitudes and engagement on a one-to-one basis, a correlation does exist. However, it is difficult to discern meaningful patterns here, as political interest and political attitudes among young people seem to be among those things most forcefully and persistently shaped by national trajectories. Thus, for example, while recent years have seen basically no unrest or inclination to demonstrate on a large


scale on the side of young people in Germany, these still retain one of the comparatively highest levels of political interest (although this level remains low in historical comparison within the country).

These observations serve as a strong reminder of how difficult it is to think about and conceive anything like a 'coherent' youth policy on a national, let alone on a European scale. They highlight that while there are structural constraints on the one hand, life courses remain individual. Any youth policy needs to take this rather basic insight into account and needs to ask itself which youth-related policy or policy goal requires measures which largely remain within existing structural constraints, and which ones can usefully only be tackled within the context of 'larger' efforts of societal reform.

Parameters for youth policy

As has been shown thus far, 'youth' is a very complex figure in society. It entails a wealth of different milieus and a great variety of life course patterns, attitudes and value orientations among young people within single and across a range of countries. Against this background, formulating a coherent youth policy provides a number of challenges regarding not only the addressees and the content of policy-making, but also regarding the appropriate levels. If anything, the great variety in and the complexity of the figure of 'youth' is more than replicated in the scattered sites of decision-making on questions regarding youth. Even on the level of individual states, the formulation of coherent and consequential youth strategies often remains on the levels of declaration and weakly binding legislation, while most notably an effective institutional bundling of political competencies is rare (such as in, for example, a ministry of youth).

That said, there are no easy answers to complex challenges. However, three challenges stand out, with different implications regarding how and by whom they should be addressed. These challenges could, in a



somewhat stylized manner, be identified to be (1.) support in managing transitions in the life-course, (2.) support in the transition between the educational system and the labor market, and (3.) traditional forms of youth support.

(Ad 1.) Lives cannot and should not be planned – at least not by those who do not live them. A state should exercise the utmost amount of restraint when it comes to interfering with status passages of young people. Liberal-democratic states have generally done this and restrained themselves to setting indirect parameters for the life course of individuals through the organization of the educational system, the only direct intervention for a long time having been obligatory national service (mostly for men) in a range of countries.

Young people generally have cherished and made good pragmatic use of the fact that given the relative lack of political constraints in the pursuit of individual life courses, social and cultural constraints as well have continued to erode in the post-1968 era. Yet for many young people this high degree of flexibility, the difficulty to plan for status passages, appears as a form of increasing uncertainty and a lack of orientation. While some young people react to this situation individually by seeking specific kinds of ‘sabbatical’ – be they in the form of spending some time with voluntary social engagement, be it in the form of a prolonged trip abroad – a coherent youth policy would seek to more systematically reflect on how to provide such opportunities for orientation. This does not necessarily have to take the form of state-organized (and financed) ‘orientation years’, but could include a range of provisions in social and tax legislation which send a clear signal to young people that their difficulties in managing and planning important status transitions are taken seriously, and that putting an emphasis on managing these transitions at the possible expense of maximized performance is an effort seen as legitimate and

receiving proper support.

(Ad. 2) The transition between the educational system and the labor market marks a rather specific passage in the life of young people. This passage has become highly flexible and can happen in many forms (or not at all, in the case of persistent unemployment starting after leaving the educational system) between the ages of 15 and the late-30s. Of course, as all other important status passages in the life of young people, this is not one which could or should be planned in advance by someone else. However, what young people could legitimately expect is a minimum of calculability as to the value of their educational titles. Much of the uncertainty felt by young people within the educational system, the eagerness to perform not in order to get an education (‘Bildung’) but a title, and the much-cited ‘inflation of titles’ is due to fact that in a situation characterized by a bewildering variety of educational systems and titles it is ever harder to assess how achieved titles can be used for a successful entry into the labor market. While variety often and also here to some degree is an asset, too much variety is a hindrance in this respect, both within some individual countries (particularly where in federal systems the respective competencies reside with individual units of the federation) as much as between different countries.

(Ad. 3) While the challenges described thus far result from differentiation and individualization in modern, (post-)industrial society and are thus of a fairly ‘novel’ character, they must not obstruct the view on persistent and ‘traditional’ challenges facing parts of any given youth population. These range from economic deprivation and resulting ‘chain exclusions’, that is the lack of chances of participation in the educational, political, labor market systems as a result of parents’ social status; over issues of youth delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse; to problems associated with media (over-) consumption and use. While these challenges might change their shape,

they require a durable professional infrastructure in the area of youth (and social) work and support. It is a matter of debate which political level is best suited to address the challenges described above. However, youth work and support is the area closest to the individual and services and programmes should be addressed to communities as specific as possible. National or even international resources should only be mobilized in a subsidiary fashion. The international (e.g. EU, OECD) level is the one which most usefully can be utilized to address the second kind of challenge addressed above. Despite prolonged efforts in that respect, the comparability of education titles is still very low, if not in formal, then in practical terms. However, it would be wrong to conclude that such a situation could be remedied in a strict top-down approach. Quite to the contrary, any efforts in such respect can only bear fruit if comparability is ensured on a national level in the first place (witness the maze of the German educational landscape). National programs and plans could arguably be most useful in making offers in respect to the transition challenges identified above.

The purpose of this short intervention has not been to offer specific solutions to specific problems, but rather to identify large areas which require new and sustained debate in order to shape future youth policy. That such a debate itself is fragmented and often almost non-existent is itself a problem worth considering further. It points, to some degree, to a lack of focal points for discussions about young people as provided most notably in Germany by the tradition of the Shell Youth Studies. However, the suspicion is that the state of the debate is mostly due to the fact that youth does not rank high among the policy priorities in most countries, and the grave danger is that in ageing societies this situation might persist, if not worsen.

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