

YOUTH IN EUROPE  
OFFENBURG  
TALKS “ ”



# #3

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

## CONCEPTUAL REFLECTIONS

## WHAT ARE THE “YOUTH IN EUROPE OFFENBURG TALKS” ABOUT?

The series “Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks” are expert workshops on themes relevant to the youth sector and with an impact on youth policy, youth work practice and young people’s lives in general. Around 30 researchers, policy makers and practitioners, selected based on their expertise on the given theme, come to discuss controversial issues, explore new areas and phenomena and to look at answers in the youth field. Discussions are stimulated by short inputs by experts, facilitated by a moderator, documented by videos and summarised by rapporteurs. The talks are hosted annually in Offenburg, Germany, by a steering group representing five National Agencies of the Erasmus+ Youth in Action Programme<sup>1</sup>.

## THEME AND BACKGROUND OF THE 3rd EDITION

40 years ago, neoliberalism started dominating the political agenda in Western democracies and 20 years ago the term ‘post-democracy’<sup>2</sup> was coined by the British political scientist Colin Crouch. For many years, experts have claimed that our democracies in general and civil society are under threat, and we are moving towards a post-democratic society, which provokes a “democratic fatigue syndrome” as the Belgian historian David van Reybrouck<sup>3</sup> puts it. Noam Chomsky, an American linguist, philosopher and political activist, sees an ‘Age of Resentment’ against socioeconomic policies which have harmed the majority of the population for a generation and have consciously and in principle undermined democratic participation”.<sup>4</sup>

Looking further back to the late 1960s/early 1970s, with the emergence of new social movements (for civil and human rights, students, women, youth, LGBT, ecological movements etc.), and later with the collapse of the communist bloc, many parts of the population were attracted and motivated to enter the political arena in one way or another and to express their interests and concerns and to stand up for their rights: minorities, young people, old people, farmers, workers, women and so on. Democracy seemed to be an everlasting and ever-growing liberal political system in which citizens and civil society play a substantial and emancipated role. It got more and more evident that civil society

1 JINT Belgium Flanders; ARCHIMEDES Foundation Estonia; EDUFI Finland; JUGEND für Europa Germany; MOVIT Slovenia

2 According to Wikipedia the term “post-democracy” defines a post-democratic society as one “that continues to have and to use all the institutions of democracy, but in which they increasingly become a formal shell”. Crouch states that we are not “living in a post-democratic society, but that we were moving towards such a condition”. As a consequence, fewer voters use their right to vote, or do vote but don’t expect much, or vote for nationalistic, xenophobic and populist parties, politicians ignore undesirable outcomes of referendums or opinion polls, foreign governments can influence internal politics of a sovereign country and private interest becomes increasingly influential in public policy.

3 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Van\\_Reybrouck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Van_Reybrouck)

4 Noam Chomsky: Neoliberalism Is Destroying Our Democracy; <https://chomsky.info/06022017/>



and civil society organisations, including youth organisations, perform relevant functions in democratic life. In economic terms the third sector (social economy, including a wide range of community, voluntary and not-for-profit activities) was seen to act on an equal footing with the first (private business) sector and the second (public) sector.

Naturally, some sections of the society were concerned about the activism of larger parts of the population and wanted to sustain the neoliberal agenda. Others were alienated and questioned political and socio-cultural changes (and achievements) that had been made. The loss of common goals and traditional communities, globalisation, the dominance and entanglement of public and private sectors, privatisation, and non-balanced debates in political parties led to frustration and resentment. These sections wanted to turn back the wheel of history. Consequently, along with the economic crisis and related austerity measures taking place in most European countries as of 2010, the civil society and the third sector came under threat and are still and increasingly facing hostile conditions for civil, political and social engagement, leading to “shrinking civic spaces”<sup>5</sup>. This is fostered by an authoritarian pushback on democracy and human rights based on anti-democratic and neoliberal tendencies. This pushback is also reflected in increasing authoritarianism and punitive tendencies in families, education, welfare and youth and social work<sup>6</sup>.

Where does youth work stand in this situation? The current political landscape in Europe and its impact on youth work as well as the role of youth work in “providing spaces and building bridges” has been discussed by youth workers, youth researchers and policy makers in some events<sup>7</sup>. As a result, a clear political focus on democracy, social cohesion and human rights has been demanded, and current challenges have been analysed and discussed, such as growing nationalism, economic policies aiming exclusively at profit-growth, the denial of ecological consequences, the very principle of solidarity being questioned, and unequal opportunities for young people. To put it in positive terms, the debates also offer a vision of Europe, centred on democratic and social cohesion, based on strong civil societies; youth workers, political decision-makers and other key stakeholders of youth work in Europe are called to stand up and fight for this vision while protecting and enlarging spaces for youth work and civil society.

Against this background, the “Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks” will contribute

*5 The Council of Europe organised under the thematic priority “Revitalising Democracy” a consultative meeting on the phenomena of “shrinking spaces” (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/shrinking-space>); at the same time (2018/19) the European Youth Forum had commissioned a research titled “The Shrinking Space for Civil Society and its impacts on Young People and Their Organisations” (<https://rm.coe.int/2018-shrinkingcivicspacesforyouth-executivesummary/16808eb41b>). Today, the topic is at the core of political priorities of the European Union trio presidencies (Germany – Portugal – Slovenia) and will similarly be the subject of discussion at Deutscher Kinder- und Jugendhilfetag 2021 (German Children & Youth Work & Welfare Service Fair) in Germany.*

*6 Widersprüche #154: Neuer Autoritarismus – Schwarze Pädagogik 2.0? Punitive Tendenzen in Familie, Schule und Kinder- und Jugendarbeit (Dez.2019)*

*7 E.g. the 2nd European Youth Work Convention, “Similarities in a world of difference” in Brussels 2015 and the European Conference “Regaining Europe – The Role of Youth Work in Supporting European Cohesion” in Leipzig 2019.*



to and continue the discussions by organising an event for experts to exchange views on “Shrinking Spaces for Youth Work!? – Challenges for Post-Democratic Societies”. In many countries, youth work has always struggled to “position” itself politically – neither wishing to retreat into an individualised process nor wanting to be co-opted or compelled into particular political channels. Maintaining some kind of political neutrality while promoting an often highly “politicised” value base and seeking, at the very least, to engage in “political” dialogue with young people as part of a “political” – non-formal – educational role has always been an issue for youth work, be it under conditions of open, liberal democracy or under illiberal democratic circumstances. The relevant underlying questions are: which side is youth work on and where does youth work stand and want to go?

The discussions in the Offenburg Talks should reflect on the following items (a non-exhaustive list):

- How can youth work support young people in being agents of social change and how can it engage with particular challenges?
- How can youth work motivate young people to participate more actively: individually and collectively?
- Which spaces for young people, for youth work and activities of civil society are shrinking and under threat, and which probably not? Which arenas might provide even more space, also connecting to different social realities, new and changing spaces where youth (sub-)culture happens, emerges and develops, in the context of changing demographics, in rural and urban areas, in diverse regions and countries in Europe?
- What impact does increased commercialisation and gentrification of urban areas have on youth work and on young people’s lives?
- How can youth workers and youth organisations use social media as an additional “space” for public debates, and what are the challenges in this respect?
- How can advocacy groups help support specific interests of young people and civil society at large?
- How can youth work build bridges and liaise with other sectors, such as education, welfare, justice and work in which democratic principles are obviously shrinking?
- What role should youth and social movements play, including youth organisations, with regard to democracy and participation, freedom of speech, rights of assembly and association, human rights?
- What kind of youth work is supported by public bodies and what is ignored, or even excluded or hindered, and which programmatic, legal and budgetary measures are taken to regulate (and control) the youth sector?
- How do youth workers and youth organisations affected by “closing spaces” respond to this situation and defend their stance?
- How can the demand for youth work for ALL young people, in particular the marginalised ones, be satisfied?



Different from the Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks #2, which focused on Nationalism, Populism and Right-Wing Extremism and the role of youth work, the Talks #3 in 2020 will look at the mainstream, at new and changing political frameworks and orientations, at youth work as a part of civil society and the third sector, at the role of youth work in providing spaces for young people and building bridges to other parts of society, at being an integral part of democratic cultures and environments.

The discussions in Youth in Europe: Offenburg Talks #3 will focus on the future of civil society and of youth work in the times of post-democracy and neoliberalism as contemporary key political issues and will consider how youth work can and should respond to related challenges and upcoming questions.

### DATE AND PLACE OF “YOUTH IN EUROPE: OFFENBURG TALKS”

The third edition of the talks will take place online on November 11 & 12, 2020.

Please visit <https://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/ueber-jfe/projekte/YouthInEurope-OffenburgTalks/> for more details.

### CONTACT AND COORDINATION:

Claudius Siebel, JUGEND für Europa [siebel@jfemail.de](mailto:siebel@jfemail.de)

Andreas Hirsch, JUGEND für Europa [hirsch@jfemail.de](mailto:hirsch@jfemail.de)

Hanjo Schild [hanjo.schild@gmail.com](mailto:hanjo.schild@gmail.com)

