



**Event Report  
BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE  
WE ARE EUROPE!**

**Young Voices from Germany, Greece, Italy and Portugal on the Situation of Youth in Their Home Countries, the European Elections and What They Expect from the European Union<sup>1</sup>**

*In the autumn of 2013 fifteen young people from Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain came to Brussels to discuss their “**common future in the eurozone**” with each other and with representatives of the EU-Institutions, think tanks, NGOs and social partners. After a week of hard work and intense debates they were united in their **conclusions**: “**Our discussions have shown that there is, indeed, a north-south divide. More critical input from the south is needed to make people in the north aware of the current situation in the southern countries. The north-south dialectic must be overcome by a greater awareness of the historical and social reality in every region. Awareness of the north should not be confused with pitying the south: making the European system work is important for all the countries alike.**” Their solidarity did not stop there. The debate is continuing in the blog „[Young Voices of Europe](#)” and four of them were back in Brussels to talk about the situation of young people in their home countries just before the European elections and what they expect from the new MEPs and the European Union.*

**Summary**

The current crisis severely affects young people in Italy, Portugal and Greece but also Germany in many ways. The main challenges for Europe are the present economic north-south cleavage, but also the increasing divide between the young and the older generation concerning employment. Youth unemployment ranges between 40 to 58 percent in southern Europe creating a bleak outlook for the future of the young. In the slipstream of the crisis nationalist

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<sup>1</sup> The event took place on 7<sup>th</sup> of May 2014. Guest speakers were Vasco Batista (Portugal), Armanda Cetrulo (Italy), Styliia Kampani (Greece) and Julian Rappold (Germany). Margherita Bussi, researcher at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), moderated the debate. The event was held under Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

ideologies spread throughout the whole EU which will not be without consequences for the upcoming European elections. Against this background it is necessary to not only speak *about* the youth and their problems, but to give young people a voice in the Brussels discourse.

## Italy<sup>2</sup>

The GDP growth, the total unemployment and the youth unemployment rate of Italy since 2006 show that Italy always performed less well than the EU-17-average. But since the crisis hit the country, things have become worse. Especially youth unemployment is worrisome as it ranks at a 40 percent high in 2013, while the EU-17-average is about 23 percent of the 15 to 24 year olds. Therefore unemployment and the economic situation are the top priority of Italian concerns. The macro-economic data mirrors the political instability and weakness of the country and vice versa as the government changed four times in roughly three years. The crisis fundamentally changed Italian reality and perception of the EU. According to Eurobarometer, in 2013, 71 percent of Italians believed that the EU does not take Italian issues into account, whereas only 48 percent shared that view in 2007. From 2012 to 2013 the perception of the EU decreased significantly, moreover a majority of 53 percent of Italians does not feel European at all. This can also be seen in the support for the euro: in 2007 63 percent of the Italian citizens were in favour of the single currency which shrunk to 53 percent in 2013 accompanied by a growing number of Eurosceptics.

Merging these numbers it can be concluded that for most Italian people the EU has turned from a strict and efficient institution, which received even more trust than the own government, into the symbol for austerity, bureaucracy and technocratic power. The deep stagnation of the country disillusioned its citizens and therefore gives room for extremist movements who try to take advantage of the people's anger and fear.

Before turning to the details and distinctive features of the Italian youth it has to be stated that they are not too different from the rest of the Italian society even though they are under a lot of pressure, as 40 percent of unemployed young people indicates clearly. Moreover the Italian youth is hampered by increasing tuition fees, deterioration of family conditions (as many parents lost their job) and huge cuts in public spending. Accordingly there is a high risk of poverty and social exclusion predominantly for young Italians. But the perception of the EU by young people contradicts the hardships they face, as age correlates significantly with a more positive connection to EU citizenship. The age cohort of the 15 to 24 year old accounts with 59 percent of the total group for the highest share of people who feel as EU citizens; whereas only 45 percent of the 55+ feel the same way.

At first glance it is surprising that the stronger affiliation with the EU as a citizen does not relate to trust into its institutions. The young trust the EU less among all age groups in Italian society: Only 21 percent of the 15 to 24 year olds tend to trust the EU while the groups of the 25 to 39 and the 40 to 54 year-old Italians have the most trust with 30 and 27 percent of its total share. How to explain that presumed contradiction? The young are brought up in the light of the EU's positive features, such as freedom and peace in general, and especially free movement, which

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<sup>2</sup> The data used in this chapter derives from Eurostat and from the Eurobarometer.

is subsidised by EU-programmes. Despite that, the young are among the social groups which have been hit hardest by the crisis and they do not have the feeling to be supported neither by their government nor by the EU. This obviously creates distrust and disappointment.

The overall call for *more Europe* by the Italians looks like a glimmer of light in all that darkness, e.g. 60 percent of Italians ask for a European minister of finance. But the call for more Europe includes the demand for profound reforms on EU level. The young are in favour of an end of austerity, a strong plan for more employment, more resources for education and job stability, while environmental issues are at the end of the wish list. All these hopes should be addressed by national and EU politicians to regain trust in the state and the EU.

## **Greece**

Many of the features of the Italian case apply to the Greek case as well. However, with 58 percent of the young unemployed, the situation is even more severe. How bad the situation was becomes clear when you bear in mind that youth unemployment already has decreased in comparison to last year. General unemployment in Greece currently ranks at 26 percent and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) projects that even a GDP growth of 3.5 percent will level unemployment at 22 percent in 2019. At the moment the current GDP growth rate is at 0.6 percent, which is broadly depicted as a sign of recovery. The inflation of the euro is 0.4 percent as it is not a national currency which would have been depreciated in an economical crisis. The outlook on the Greece's national debt is optimistically forecast to be at 124 percent of the GDP in 2020 and 110 percent in 2022.

Shortly before the European elections the political situation reflects the crisis. Left-wing Syriza party and the liberal-conservative Nea Demokratia are competing head-to-head for the first spot in the elections to the EP. Furthermore, two new parties have emerged: Potami and Elia. Potami –which is led by the famous Greek journalist Stavros Theodorakis-- adopts characteristics mainly from the centre-left spectrum but also some of the liberal ones. Elia is PASOK with another name, founded by some members of PASOK

Asking young Greeks what concerns them most in their current situation and what they expect from Europe was the incentive of the following [video](#) and [here](#).

The biggest concern of the youth is, obviously, to find a job according to their educational background. Therefore the idea of the European youth is welcomed as such, but, unfortunately, it has so far not had an impact as it is not yet implemented in Greece. As far as the EU is concerned the young criticise its lack of transparency and the lack of information about EU decision making process. Lack of information partially goes along with a lack of education to understand the EU system, which is in the long run one of the most needed preconditions to create a stronger understanding and therefore stronger affiliation with the EU. Therefore it is crucial on short to medium term to analyse which institutions block the well-being of youth in the EU. Some consider the Council to be the brake, at least regarding the negotiations on the youth guarantee. The Council reduced the youth guarantee to a non-binding proposal and criticised it as too strict. To vote in the European elections is therefore even more important, as the vote could possibly influence the Council's policy towards the young at least to some extent.

## **Portugal**

Youth unemployment is at the top of the Portuguese problems as well, but no effective solutions were presented by domestic politicians so far. The left parties acknowledge the problem, but do not provide sound answers, whereas the conservative Portuguese Prime Minister Passos Coelho urged the young to leave their “comfort zone” and to push themselves harder to find a job.

At least the new youth guarantee promises the young the access to internships, but if these are paid or unpaid is unclear. Emigration is at a high level, the numbers are close to the mass emigrations under the dictatorship in the 1960s and 70s. But this time it is mostly the high-qualified Portuguese that leave their country for northern Europe or Portugal’s previous colonies. This ‘brain drain’ affects the society even more severe than the numbers of emigrants indicate. In the long run Portugal will suffer from that development even more, as many of the future elite will be missing in 20 to 30 years. From the outside it is judged as a positive economic sign that Portugal is back on the financial market, but this has no effect on the social situation and the daily life of the people in the country itself. Continuing austerity policies will detain relief and advancement for the average Portuguese citizen.

The campaign for the European elections is similar to the domestic debate: the new and old MEPs-candidates for the left acknowledge the problem of youth unemployment, but they do not have a concrete recipe to tackle this issue, neither do the centre and right parties. To be fair, a Portuguese solution cannot be found within the current austerity framework the Commission and the troika imposed on the country. In this situation it is not surprising that the Portuguese hesitate to vote and are sceptic about the EU. In the last elections in 2009, 60 percent abstained; this time analysts expect a similar low turnout. Through the eyes of the Portuguese the EU is perceived as some distant block which mainly imposes regulations and sanctions, while having too little legitimacy to do so. This perception is mainly shaped by the Portuguese media, which reflects the limited knowledge of the people about the institutions of the EU and their decision-making processes. However, there are distinct differences between the Commission, the EP and the Council- therefore more education on the EU system is needed in Portugal --as in the rest of the EU-- to understand that voting makes a real difference. This lack of knowledge does not differ by age; however, especially the young seem to be disconnected from the EU. It has to be explained that participation, through voting and other mechanisms, is the key to find a common solution for the current problems.

The lack of education also shows in other contexts: even though the latest IPCC report outlines some worrisome scenarios, environmental issues –similar to the situation in Italy-- reside low in the interests of Portuguese people. Fighting climate change should therefore be linked with economy and jobs.

## **Germany**

When examining the political debate in Germany it is necessary to take a look at the recent federal elections. In the years before the elections, the opposition parties were not able to differentiate themselves from the policy of the ruling coalition of Angela Merkel’s Christian

Democratic Party and the Liberal Party. Since the elections in September 2013 Germany is ruled by a grand coalition in which the Social Democrats (SPD) sacrificed their EU ambitions for domestic issues such as minimum wage. In the grand coalition it is even more difficult for the SPD to differentiate itself from the Christian Democrats, which creates also a challenging task for Martin Schulz' campaign for the elections to the European Parliament. He has to manoeuvre carefully between his domestic party, the SPD and his European campaign in the rest of Europe.

Angela Merkel still has strong support for her crisis management as many Germans believe she defended the German interests well. Furthermore, the German economy seems crisis resistant and superior to southern Europe economies, which means that --compared to the southern European Member States-- the crisis had less of an impact on the German population.

Except these inward looking issues the Ukraine-Russia conflict is currently very present in the German news and high on the political agenda. Issues like European youth unemployment or EU reforms in general are pushed aside. Bearing in mind that 64 percent of the Germans are not or just a little interested in the upcoming elections. This fatigue is accompanied by the rise of the Eurosceptic party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) which polls around 6 percent at the moment.

The concerns of young Germans who are considerably less hit by unemployment than their southern peers are mostly about non-materialistic post-modern issues as data protection and internet, reflected in the German elections with the new Pirate Party and the discussions about the NSA scandal. Furthermore, traditionally thriving issues in Germany and among the youth are environmental issues and energy policy. 65 percent of the German youth considers the environmental questions as important.

But the German youth also cares about materialistic themes, which could be a bridge to the young people in the south. They are concerned about their future and therefore take youth unemployment in Europe very seriously. At least some Germans have friends in southern Europe, partially due to the Erasmus programme. So they are aware of some of the hardships in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece and sympathise with them. Those who did not take part in any kind of exchange programme seem more distant towards the hardships of young people in other European countries. Furthermore, the German youth sees youth unemployment as a European and not national problem; hence in their view it has to be tackled on EU level and not only on the national level. It is therefore not surprising that 70 percent of the German youth call for a training guarantee similar to the youth guarantee.

Even though the economic figures tell another story -- German youth unemployment is among the lowest in Europe-- young Germans feel a subjective insecurity; which derives from a long-standing discussion about growing inequality in Germany. In 2012, 64 percent of all Germans believed that social injustice increased. Accordingly, 62 percent of the youth is afraid to lose their apprenticeship place or job. This felt insecurity is fuelled by the 'generation internship' throughout Europe, which residues on the question how to bridge the gap between graduation or training and finding a job? About 28 percent graduates have to do an internship in order to

find a job. Moreover, it is crucial to the youth to find a quality job, especially with rising part time jobs and low paid jobs in Germany. This so called low-pay sector has grown heavily in recent years and has contributed severely to income poverty among the youth as many of them need transfer-payments adding to their income by full-time jobs. All these aspects add to the picture of subjective insecurity, which could be a connecting factor with the youth in other European countries, as all of them struggle to get a foot in the door of the working world.

Therefore the EU should strengthen its efforts to reduce youth unemployment by relaxing austerity. In the long-term the EU and its Member States have to find a way to create sustainable growth and better ways of participation of citizens. Especially decision-makers should engage more in a structured dialogue with the youth at every point of policy-making from agenda setting to implementation and assessment.

## **Conclusions**

Unemployment is the crucial concern of the youth in southern Europe and ranks also high on the agenda of young Germans. All young people are more or less critical of the current EU and demand deep reforms concerning participation, more transparency and a better communication of EU-decisions. The call for transparency especially accounts for the Council which is the institution commonly connected with back-door deals instead of accountability. Moreover, it is widely agreed that participation means further inclusion of all kinds of groups and organisations of young people into a structured dialogue with decision-makers ranging from agenda-setting towards the review of policies. A precondition for participation is education about the EU, which seems to lack throughout the EU and therefore has to be pushed high on the agenda. One alarming figure which illustrates that fact is that roughly half of the European citizens know that they have a vote in the elections for the European Parliament. Concerning communication it is worthwhile to question the language, the style and channels all EU institutions use to reach the young. Despite the criticism, the young age group (at least in Italy) expresses a stronger affiliation to the EU than their parents and grandparents which lays the ground for a more legitimate EU in the future. Furthermore, there is the wish to ease austerity in order to create more quality jobs for the youth, to reduce inequality and to create sustainable growth for the future. In addition, some ask for a stronger integration of the EU, e.g. a finance minister on European level, and for a stringent fiscal policy. Nevertheless, it has to be considered that 'the young' do exist only ideally, whereas in reality they are as diverse as the rest of the societies in Europe.