

A LETTER TO THOSE WHO MUST SOON GIVE WAY TO THE NEXT GENERATION

ARTICLE BY
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The serious challenges confronting the European Union have placed the future course of its integration in doubt. Against this backdrop, young people have a central role to play. This is not only because they are largely bearing the brunt of the crises, but also because they are deeply involved in processes that, in different places, and to the surprise of those directing the European project, are defining our society. This role will only become more defining in the future, which ought to make European leaders consider the fate of young people much more carefully.

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**CARTA A LA
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 DE 20 AÑOS**

La gente joven está jugando un papel fundamental en dibujar el horizonte de la Unión Europea. Es el momento de que quienes están a cargo del proyecto europeo lo tengan en cuenta.

The historical contempt shown to youths at election time has resulted in a disproportionate distribution of the costs of the crisis, whereby young people have been pushed to the fringes of society. That scorn has led to indignation and that indignation to being part of the immense transformational processes in the European Union. The young have become key drivers of change in both the rejuvenation and democratic reversal within politics, all without society being aware, or so it seems, of this situation. We cannot see what is on the horizon for the European Union; it could be progress and unity, or disintegration. Whichever it is, the need to include young people in the decisions taken at this critical point where we find ourselves is irrefutable because they already define the EU's horizon, and because they will be the ones who continue defining it.

A GENERATION ON THE EDGE

The words 'unemployment' and 'youth' have in recent times constantly gone hand in hand. And 'words' is surely the best way to summarise

the political response given to this problem in the last few years: words and little else. A complete lack of action and social policies, together with some completely inadequate funding¹ have allowed youth unemployment to rise to 45.3% in Spain and 48.9% in Greece², while its level in the EU remains at 19.4%. Basically, in both countries, for every two people under 25 years of age actively seeking a job, only one of them is able to find work. In relation to total unemployment, the trend has practically not changed over the last 20 years: youth unemployment and total unemployment have remained relatively parallel, the former being double the rate of the latter, both in Spain and in the EU.

To better understand the gravity of the situation that young people have faced in recent years, several details are needed to complete the picture. At the job level, the rate of long-term youth unemployment is a good example: in Spain the rate is 39.2%, in Greece and Italy it exceeds 50%, while it is at 33.6% in the European Union³. In other words, more than one-third of those under 25 who are looking for work have spent more than 12 months in that quest.

Another important figure is the percentage of young part-time workers (71.3% in Spain,

43.6% in the EU⁴), which portrays the nature and quality of work that the young people who do manage to find jobs end up in. The actual percentage of self-employed young people in the European Union is also significant: only 4% of the 19.4 million youths are in employment⁵. This proportion, which has remained constant throughout the crisis, conveys the actual opportunities in contrast with the suggestion that has been oft-times repeated like a mantra (start a business, they say, as if courage were the problem) and which places the burden of the problem on the individual rather than the institutions that should shoulder the responsibility.

Unemployment is the most visible area, but there are others. The risk of poverty and social exclusion also greatly exceeds the rate in other age groups. In Spain, 38.6% of young people between 18 and 24 years of age are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (31.9% in the EU), while the total rate is 29.2% (24.4% in the EU)⁶. Furthermore, the changes in these levels over the last decade have been disproportionately negative for the young. In 2005, the risk of poverty and social exclusion level among young people in Spain was even lower than the total rate (21.7% for the 18-24 age group in compar

1 <http://www.euractiv.com/section/social-europe-jobs/opinion/youth-employment-together-we-can-make-a-change/>

2 Eurostat, data from 02/2016: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7225076/3-04042016-BP-EN.pdf/e04dadf1-8c8b-4d9b-af51-bfc2d5ab8c4a>

3 Eurostat, data from third quarter 2015: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/gdp-and-beyond/quality-of-life/long-term-unemployment-rate>

4 Eurostat, Young people between 15 and 24 years old, data from 2015: <http://goo.gl/vmgCvb>

5 Eurofound 2012: <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2012/labour-market-social-policies/needs-young-people-not-in-employment-education-or-training-characteristics-costs-and-policy>

6 Eurostat, data from 2014: <http://goo.gl/jHY1KQ>

ison with 24.3% for all age groups). In the EU, while the total rate has decreased since 2005 (25.8% in that year), it has increased for young people.

In Europe, especially in the south, a significant proportion of society has been pushed into an unprecedented situation of social upheaval. Hundreds of thousands of young people have been forced to leave Spain since 2011⁷; the future cost of this loss of talent, motivation and contribution to the welfare state can easily be imagined. A large proportion of a generation, categorised as lost and for whom the end of the crisis is already too late, have seen their future prospects snatched away. Their right to live an independent life and make their own decisions have been lost and they are obliged to accept any job, work at any wage, study what the labour market demands and return to live with their parents⁸. It is clear that the results of all this will be long-lasting and affect their personal and professional development.

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Why young people? The words that best explain how we ended up here are participation and democracy.

From the point of view of the political elite, the issue is clear. Under 18-year-olds cannot vote and young people over that age are generally not interested in politics.

Throughout recent history, they have been an electorally discouraged segment to which politicians do not pay attention, while consideration is generously given to those over 60. Young people have not been a cohesive group of voters who would have only lobbied for their specific interests – despite

under-30s counting for 65 million voters in the European Union – and to whom political parties can appeal through specific policies. They are a textbook case in political economy.

In this way, parliaments continue to be, overall, the playground of over-50, white

7 http://www.lasexta.com/noticias/sociedad/ine-cifra-medio-millon-numero-jovenes-que-han-emigrado-tesis-marea-granate-multiplica-cinco_20160103572407eb4beb28d446005f23.html

8 The average age of emancipation of the youth in Spain is of 29.1 years (26.2 in the EU) and increases constantly. Eurostat, data from 2014: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=yth_demo_030&lang=en

males in suits. Indeed, the average age in the European Parliament is 53⁹. For Spain's 11th legislature, the average age of its lower house dropped to 47¹⁰, closer to the national average age of 43, thanks to the entry of new political parties. But the political class has not stopped ageing¹¹. Parliaments still do not reflect the diversity of the society that they represent, whether in terms of gender, age, ethnicity or other, and this lack of voice and representation results in young people having to bear a larger proportion of the costs entailed by the crisis, in all its aspects. In essence, parliaments are not representing young people, nor are they seeking to do so.

THE TREMORS BEFORE THE ERUPTION

Yet, the outrage of the youth has unexpectedly boiled over. In different ways, in different places and with different goals, young people are reacting. They are, across the length and breadth of the European Union, playing a decisive role in the processes that are defining the path of the European project, albeit in very disparate directions. Ignoring this has been an error of great proportions, which is still impacting today.

One of these processes was unleashed in the months of May and June 2011 across various Spanish cities. The Indignados were not just a movement of youths but a diverse group made up of people of all ages. One of their distinguishing characteristics was, in fact, that social and generational or ideological cross-section. But the central role played by youths in the forming and organising of the 15M movement was of huge importance, thereby allowing its ideas to be more extensively shared.

The impact of this movement is of a scale that we have not yet wholly ascertained. The empowerment of so many citizens and the discovery of unconventional participation methods have resulted in a complete change in the political map of the country that could not have been imagined in 2011. A change in the discourse that challenged the 'TINA – There Is No Alternative' narrative and replaced it with another, where words like transparency, regeneration, participation, common good or primaries (which did not exist in the political vocabulary except for small parties like EQUO) have become essential. A complete change in the political agenda, which began to prioritise the rejection of corruption, evictions and austerity, it created political and journalistic platforms

9 <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS-Briefing-542150-European-Parliament-Facts-and-Figures-FINAL.pdf>

10 http://www.elespanol.com/espana/20160118/95490513_0.html

11 The data shows that the average age of members in the Congress of Deputies was of 42 years old in 1979 and of 49 years old in 2008: <http://politikon.es/2013/07/08/cuando-la-politica-se-hizo-vieja/>

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and projects, new trends in architecture and transformations in our models of consumption and communication. The 15M movement indeed caused a profound change in the political reality; its impact crossed oceans and still reverberates five years later. In the squares of Paris, as I write these lines, the activists of the Nuit Debout protests stand against a political class that fears them, aware of what similar citizen protests created in Spain and Italy not long ago. They fear them and they are right to fear them.

The consequences of thousands of young people plunging into a wave of mobilisation and participation transcend elections. In Spain and elsewhere, the political involvement of young people is leading to some extraordinary results.

In Spain, the parties that know how to mobilise their young voters obtained some results that were unthinkable only a few years ago. The Valencian coalition, *Compromís*, was one of the first to do it. It managed to increase its 4.8% of the vote in the 2011 general elections to 25.09% in the 2015 elections and did this by becoming the most voted party among voters under 34 years of age¹². Since 2015, it has also governed the Region of Valencia with the Socialist Party.

Another example is *Podemos*. This party, with undeniable ties to the *Indignados* movement of 2011, was created in the months leading up to the 2014 European elections. It has managed to transform itself into a real option for the government of Spain, much to the chagrin of the two parties that have shared power since the end of the Franco dictatorship. The Spanish Centre for Sociology Research estimates that 35% of under 35-year-olds voted for *Podemos* in the 2015 general elections¹³, while the other three main political parties each garnered only 15% of the votes from this age group. The generation gap and its impact in changing the country's political

12 El Mundo, 25/10/2015: <http://www.elmundo.es/comunidad-valenciana/2015/10/25/562bc3f7e2704ee15a8b463d.html>

13 El Español, 07/05/2016: http://www.elespanol.com/espana/20160507/122987812_0.html

scene is even witnessed in another party, Ciudadanos, the second preference for those under 35, though with little clout among the over 54-year-olds.

Young people have the ability to create true shifts in the political map of our countries if they mobilise to vote. It is happening in Spain, but also in many other countries, in very different directions.

In the Greek elections of June 2012, Syriza (a then newly formed party) and Golden Dawn (a neo-Nazi party) obtained 26.9% and 6.9% of the votes respectively by becoming the favoured choices of those under 35. Syriza garnered 37% of the votes among the under-25s, while Golden Dawn, which gained entry into the parliament for the first time, gained 13% of the votes from this age group and 16% from the 25-34 age range¹⁴. The Green Party of England and Wales, which has experienced an extraordinary gain in vote percentages and influence, has done so by increasing the number of its young members from 1,300 in 2013 to 14,000 in 2015¹⁵. In Austria, the only EU country that gives the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds at the national level and where the rise of the xenophobic FPÖ and

the Green Party have witnessed an electoral tsunami, 51% of under-29 males voted for the FPÖ in the first round of the presidential elections, according to surveys¹⁶. In France, the National Front of Marine Le Pen secured 35% of votes among voters between 18 and 35. And the list goes on: Netherlands, Denmark, Poland... countries all with similar realities¹⁷. While I write this, the rising importance of youths in the weeks prior to the UK referendum on EU membership may be decisive in that result¹⁸.

The influence of young people in the major challenges confronting the European Union goes beyond even politics and elections. The radicalisation of European youths recruited in the outskirts of cities like Brussels or Paris, and their participation in terrorist acts, must be understood as the responsibility not of Islam but of the public policies in relation to youth and integration, as recently pointed out by The New York Times¹⁹. It must be understood from a much broader perspective, one that reflects on the decades-long expansion of youth exclusion in terms of society, employment and education and that considers the capacity of marginalisation to create fertile ground for radicalisation.

14 Golden Dawn and its Appeal to Greek Youth, Alexandros Sakellariou, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/athen/11501.pdf>

15 Huffington Post, 14/01/2015: http://www.huffingpost.co.uk/2015/01/14/why-is-the-green-party-successful-british-youths_n_6470326.html

16 Zeit, 25/04/2016: <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2016-04/oesterreich-wahl-norbert-hofer-wachler>

17 Deutsche Welle, 14/12/2015: <http://www.dw.com/en/young-people-vote-far-right-in-europe/a-18917193>

18 El País, 28/05/2016: http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2016/05/28/actualidad/1464449020_948036.html

19 The New York Times, 08/04/2016: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/08/world/europe/belgium-brussels-islam-radicalization.html?_r=0

AN AMBIVALENT FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH

The historic abandonment of the young population for electoral reasons has had disproportionate repercussions over the last decade. The economic crisis, the neoliberal and austerity policies to counter it, the lack of integration and the scarcity of solidarity in the European Union have pushed young people to the margins of society in terms of work, economics and community. However, the youth of many European Union countries, in turn, are reacting, in a concerted effort or otherwise, and are evolving into a force of great influence for both the integration and dissolution of the EU.

Young people are not a homogeneous force. The problems of German youth are not the same as those from southern Europe, and it is therefore not logical to assume a collective outlook. What is important is to understand that young people are a catalyst capable of creating changes throughout the political spectrum: both towards progressive rejuvenation based on human rights and democratic wholesomeness, and towards extremist, xenophobic or nationalist routes. This deserves everyone's attention. Young people are now playing a fundamental role in sketching out the European Union's horizon. Now is the time for those in charge of the European project take them into account. The future of the European Union depends on it.



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