

THE 'LOST GENERATION' – WHO IS GOING TO SAVE THEM?

Petra Kovacevic

“You know what's worse? Not being around many people as I was when I was a student. Even though I play football with my friends every Sunday, I help my grandfather out, I feel like I'm starting to lose touch with the world. It's been almost half a year and I've had enough, I really want to work! But, you know...there isn't anything out there for me“, says Vladimir Brajkovic, a young 25-year old Croatian who graduated in agriculture¹. He specialized in animal genetics and was at the top of his class.

Today, Vladimir's at the bottom of the list at the Croatian Employment Service, together with 50 per cent of young Croatians between the age of 18 and 25². Topping Croatia are Spain with 55 per cent and Greece with 58 per cent of young people who are unemployed and have been hit hardest by the economic crisis. What Vladimir is starting to fear is being excluded from social and economic life, just like 85 per cent of young Croatians who are in the same situation. More than half of young Europeans feel that in their country young people have been marginalised in some way by the crisis, according to Eurobarometer³.

Even though the European Union has been saying that the EU youth has been on the top of its agenda, in the last five years the youth unemployment rate has risen 10 per cent. Currently overall 5,7 million young people in the European Union are out of job⁴. Member states are implementing austerity measures which are further affecting their young lives. What is being done to save the future of the 'lost generation'?

A year ago the EU heads of states launched the Youth Employment Initiative, a 6 billion euros worth guarantee which aims to ensure that young people in the EU get a quality job, continued education, an internship or an apprenticeship within four months after they leave formal education. These 6 billion euros are divided between eleven EU countries where the youth unemployment rate is 25 per cent or higher. Even though the initiative is said to have a great potential, many see it as a step which is too small to make a difference. Salvatore Marra, the president of the Youth Committee at

¹ Interview, Skype, Cardiff-Zagreb, 13/5/2014

² Eurostat (2014) Table Code: tsdec460 – Unemployment rate by age group [Online Table] Available: <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tsdec460> [viewed 10/5/2014]

³ Eurobarometer (2014) *European Youth in 2014 – Analytical Synthesis* [Online] Available: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/youth/eb_395_synthesis_youth_en.pdf [viewed 13/5/2014]

⁴ Eurostat (2014) *Euro area unemployment rate at 12.0%* [Online] Available: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/3-28022014-AP/EN/3-28022014-AP-EN.PDF [viewed 10/5/2014]

the European Trade Union Confederation says⁵: “That money is absolutely not enough. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that the EU needs at least 21 billion euros to effectively fight against youth unemployment - which means we're far, far from that.”

However, it's not just about numbers. The implementation of this initiative asks from member countries to invest more money and undertake some serious structural reforms. According to ILO estimates, it would cost each of the member countries around 1.5 per cent of its GDP per year⁶. In comparison with 153 billion euros that the EU taxpayers pay every year for youth unemployment, this seems like a modest investment.

Ms Clementine Moyart, the Policy Officer for Employment at the European Youth Forum, the largest platform of European non-governmental youth organisations, thinks there is a serious lack of political ambition⁷. “In some member states the Youth Guarantee has been implemented alongside measures that the National Youth Councils have expressly opposed, for instance some cuts in unemployment benefits for young people”, she says. Vesna Jusup from the Youth in Crisis initiative, which encourages young people to reinvent Europe together, thinks youth unemployment is not an isolated issue that can be tackled as a separate campaign⁸. She says: “It's more a consequence of non-democratic, short-visioned governance that subordinated itself to different priorities, mostly economic ones. As such it apparently slipped lower on scale of political priorities of current political leaders in member countries.”

Austerity measures have had an enormous negative impact on the youth labour market across the whole EU. At the beginning of this year, the Croatian government has completely stopped the measures of Active Employment Policies by cutting the funding to zero. Right now, Croatia is left with only around 60 million euros which it will get from the Youth Employment Initiative. The Croatian Youth Network, which is the country's official youth council, said this showed that the Croatian government doesn't only know how to plan ahead, but also that it doesn't recognize the importance of the policies it's implementing⁹. Sven Janovski, the council's vice-president said on council's website: “After this move, the success and future of the Youth Employment Initiative is also at stake. If the government doesn't want to or isn't capable of treating young people responsibly, we really need to ask ourselves – is the government able to guarantee one single thing?”

⁵ Interview, Skype, Cardiff-Bruxelles, 13/5/2014

⁶ International Labour Organization (2014) Global Employment Trends 2013 [Online] Available: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_202326.pdf [viewed 15/5/2014]

⁷ Interview, Skype, Cardiff-Bruxelles, 13/5/2014

⁸ Interview, e-mail, Cardiff-Belgrade, 13/5/2014

⁹ Croatian Youth Network (2014) *The government and the Ministry are not guaranteeing anything to youth anymore* [Online] <http://www.mmh.hr/hr/vijesti/vlada-i-ministarstvo-vise-nista-ne-garantiraju-mladima> [viewed 10/5/2014]

After sending more than ten job applications and getting no answers, Vladimir even applied for a tourist guide job opening at a Croatian national park, but a few days later the call for applications just disappeared. “Both of my parents are working, so it's not that bad, but I'm more and more embarrassed when I need to ask them for some money“, he says. Vladimir is lucky. Many young people in the EU risk getting trapped in the poverty cycle and being further excluded from the society. According to a research at the University of Portsmouth¹⁰, spending cuts in Greece are in correlation with rising suicide rates.

Meanwhile, the European Union says there are 2 million vacant job positions that the young people don't have the skills for¹¹. Mr Marra, except for the lack of fundings, says this is also another problem. “Yes, but what kind of jobs are we talking about? It's true, maybe we should be more careful in terms of education planning, guidance and investigating which would be the skills of the future. On the other side, the European crisis wasn't expected to be like this. For example, before the crisis everybody said that Europe had a strong industry. In the end, it was devastated by the crisis with millions of jobs lost in the industrial sector – something young people have been encouraged to study until then. Quality job opportunities need to be developed.“

The right to quality jobs that match young people's skills requires intervention from governments at the educational level. Ms Moyart says that the European Youth Forum has been extremely concerned that 'any job is a good job' has become a new mantra propagated in some member states. “We believe that quality employment is a crucial element with regards to the professional development, autonomy and well-being of young people in Europe. There needs to be quality assurance – the Youth Employment Initiative must not create poor quality jobs and poor quality training for youth as this will merely perpetuate the issue of precarious work which young people since the crisis have been increasingly forced to undertake“, she adds.

There is a private non-profit initiative called Europatriates which has been offering concrete solutions to EU countries based on the German labour market reforms. The idea is to reduce the youth unemployment by temporarily resettling the young unemployed in another European host country for apprenticeship, training and employment. At the same time perspectives for employment are being developed and supported in their home country. Dr. Christian Ege, who was the State Secretary at the Ministry of Economics and Labour in a German Federal State, has been helping to launch their pilot programme in June this year. “ What we need in Europe is more exchange of good practice in national labour market policies. We have been talking to the European Union about it, but

¹⁰ Antonakakis, N. and Collins A. (2014) The impact of fiscal austerity on suicide: On the empirics of a modern Greek tragedy. *Social Science & Medicine* 112, pp. 39-50

¹¹ European Commission (2014) *Youth Employment* [Online] Available: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1036> [viewed 10/5/2014]

they say that they gave most of their funds to its countries. I think that they could take the part of that money and profit from the tools and solutions which worked for Germany, but then again modify them and include their own experts because every country is different. “ he says¹².

While the countries are sending their proposals on how they plan to implement the Youth Employment initiative, almost eight in ten young people have not even heard of it. According to the research made by Eurobarometer, only 4 per cent of them surveyed have detailed knowledge of it¹³. However, what matters more is how they feel about the European Union – right now 47 per cent of EU citizens fear that the crisis isn't over and that the worse is yet to come¹⁴.

Even though the general interest in the European elections has been falling constantly, youth organisations are encouraging young people to vote next week. Ms Jusup from Youth in Crisis initiative says: “ We need to think now - not only about tomorrow and this year - but to predict a political directions for the next 5 years and ensure that those people who we elect now work not only for our future but also for the generations to come. We need to use this momentum to reclaim our future on our terms.”

The first real European generation, born and raised in the European Union, is struggling to find a decent job and a place in the society. “I'm still an optimist, that's who I am. What else can I do?“, says Vladimir with a smile. In the end, what young people like him need to be able to imagine isn't money – it's happiness.

¹² Interview, Skype, Cardiff- Saarbrücken

¹³ Eurobarometer (2014) *European Youth in 2014 – Analytical Synthesis* [Online] Available: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/youth/eb_395_synthesis_youth_en.pdf [viewed 13/5/2014]

¹⁴ European Commission (2014) *Special Eurobarometer 415: Europeans in 2014* [Online] Available: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_415_data_en.pdf [viewed 13/5/2014]