

Europe's Youth: Its Hopes and Discontents

Report

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The impact of global pandemic of COVID-19, the pushback against authoritarianism and climate crisis are some of the most pressing challenges and themes that resonate throughout the contemporary world. These challenges will particularly affect the young generation that will have to rise to the occasion and address them. Therefore, I have gone to research among my peers as to what is their opinion about these challenges, in what lies their optimism about the future, what abilities are going to be vital to possess in the near future and what do they think about the potential of the young generation in Europe. Thus this report is a summary of the research I have conducted among my peers, both students and non-students alike. Each of them has brought their unique perspective and spoke openly about what they are hopeful or anxious about in the upcoming years, without them feeling intimidated to "say what is right". The whole meaning of this research was precisely to circumvent this, so that the respondents do not have a feeling that they are being recorded or judged for their answers in an overtly formal academic research, but rather that they are having a friendly talk with one of their peers. The structure of this report is as following: short introduction of the respondents, summaries of their answers for each question that guided the conversation and finally an analysis of the conversations along with some final remarks.

The first respondent is Martin, 21 years old college student of economics from Bratislava. The second respondent is Tamara, 19 years old high school student that just finished her final exams - "maturita" (and is now looking to study massmedia communication on university) from Radava near Nové Zámky. The third respondent is Maroš from Bratislava, who is 21 years old and is working (even though he was not willing to disclose where) while waiting on his results for a makeover of the high school state exams - "maturita". The fourth and final respondent is Filip from Bratislava, who is 30 years old and works as a marketing specialist.

The first question that the respondents were to answer was: "Which challenges that today's European youth will need to confront concern you the most?"

Filip expressed his concerns mainly about the negative impact of the social media on the young generation. He developed an interesting line of thought in which he argued that the most detrimental effect of the social media is the "cult of personality" that influencers build around themselves and therefore "artificialize" real social problems. This means that the real life issues are not being solved in the actual world but rather by the means of likes/dislikes on the social media, what indeed does not solve anything. Lastly, he also called out the hypocrisy in which the modern society lives: we "fight" against inhumane working conditions in the Global South on the social media, yet the very smartphones we utilize for doing so are a product of slave-like labor.

Martin was similarly concerned about the negative effects of modern technologies on human behavior. He feels like the social media (and smartphones in general) hinder true human connection and artificialize interpersonal relationships and behavior so much, that the young generation barely ever goes to the toilet without carrying a phone. His other great concern was the impact of the outgoing pandemic on mental health, especially of young people which lost some of their most important years by being locked at their homes.

Tamara was concerned primarily about racism and homophobia/biphobia/transphobia that is still prevalent in the society. She feels like the issue is being pushed to the backseat, as being "solved" by the "colorblindness" notions of the contemporary status quo. Additionally, she believes that the tacit racism and LGBTQ-phobia are still prevalent, as was recently demonstrated by the attacks on Asian community owing to the conspiracies that Chinese people "invented" the coronavirus.

Maroš was gravely concerned about the coronacrisis in general. He said that he witnessed profound behavioral changes among his peers and overall devastating effects of the pandemic on mental health of the young generation. Also stemming from the pandemic, he is concerned about job opportunities and staying employed in general due to the manifold of employers which cut their workforce due to the financial havoc that the pandemic wrought.

Overall, it seems that among the participants' concerns stood out the negative impact of the social media on the contemporary society and the lasting effects of the global pandemic on the mental health of the young generation.

The second question for the respondents was: "Apart from these challenges, there is also optimism about some of the ways we might overcome them. What current developments make you most hopeful about the future?"

Filip is mostly hopeful about some of the positives that the era of internet brought with itself. He was applauding the ability to connect with other people, which was especially important for him as a rather introverted person and is according to him also very important for people that are being ostracized for their opinions in the environment that they live in. Finally, he sees that the human society could be improved by the global connection that the internet brings but as he argued "it will take more than a like on Greta Thunberg's tweet".

Martin is also placing his hopes into the positive aspect of the internet, that is the global connection. He thinks that unlike the previous generations, the internet enables the young people of today to step out of the boundaries of their particular country and connect, which is going to be pivotal in combating global challenges such as climate change. He is also hopeful about medical advancements such as increased emphasis on drug-free treatment of mental health issues or pharmaceutical advances in cancer treatment.

Tamara has shown great enthusiasm in new types of education. She believes that the school system should include a curriculum that would widen cultural understanding and connection. This would include subjects such as race studies, sexual education or gender studies, which are according to her still largely tabooed but imperative for the education of the future generations. She also believes that this new approach to education would be the solution to the challenge that she was most concerned with – racial prejudice and LGBTQ-phobia.

Maroš places his optimism into the discipline of the young generation. He argues that this was most visible during the hard lockdowns, in which the young people were closely following and going along with the government regulations, whereas the older generation was taking it lightly while it was meant primarily for their protection. He also believes that the young generation is very industrious and hard-working which was only boosted by the pandemic, thus his belief in their discipline.

To summarize, it seems that the respondents were mainly hopeful about something unique that this generation is able to bring to the table – be it new types of education, ability to harness the power of internet positively and as a means for societal change.

The third question of the research was: "Which abilities that you and your generation of students possess do you think will be valuable in confronting the challenges we face? "

Filip firmly believes that the most valuable abilities in the years to come will be the innovativeness of young generation. He also thinks that the young people of today "dare to dream more". This does not mean that he belittles the previous generations' achievements but he argues that there have always been a few greedy individuals who hijack even the greatest projects or movements.

Martin was mostly applauding this generation's ability to transcend the eurocentric worldview. He believes that contemporary global challenges call for people who are tolerant of those from radically different cultural backgrounds and are willing to work together. He believes that this generation is the first one in which the tacit racial prejudice is being eliminated due to the internet and global tourism.

Tamara argued similarly as Martin, meaning that she believes the most important ability of this generation will be cultural tolerance. She also proposed that innovativeness will be given a high premium in the coming years due to the overarching feeling in the society that "everything was already invented" and the high competitiveness of labor market and business ventures. Finally, she also applauded young people that have the courage to be leaders in an era in which conformism is the norm.

In a similar vein to his previous answers, Maroš was arguing in the boundaries of the coronacrisis. He posited his argument in a sense that "this generation is of course better than the previous ones". This came without much explanation as to why except for the fact that young people have greater internet literacy than their parents or grandparents, therefore they will be the ones to lead the world out of the pandemic due to their breadth of knowledge.

The recurring theme among the participants was their belief that the most important ability to possess will be innovativeness, cultural tolerance and the ability "to learn from previous generations' mistakes".

The fourth and final question that also seemed the most difficult for the respondents to answer was: "Do you feel that your potential to contribute to society is overlooked, or even dismissed? Is the potential of your generation not used enough? How do you think this can be overcome?"

Filip's approach to this question was particularly interesting since he believes that to an extent the potential of every generation was dismissed. He argued that it is rather an issue that only some people are being heard – nowadays these people are the "influencers", be it rappers or sportsmen whose potential is not dismissed because they are in the public view. In addition, he brought up a "sad fact", which is that some teenager from Kenya could have the greatest idea in the world but the society will not listen to him, whereas to some billionaire entrepreneur it just might, and it often does.

Martin was quite adamant in his belief that the potential of young generation is not being dismissed. To support his claim he argued that he sees increasing participation of young generation in various initiatives and protests which are being listened to by the governments in Europe. He sees that these projects are being taken more and more seriously each year and the older generations are finally recognizing the qualities of young people today.

In contradiction to Martin, Tamara firmly believes that the potential of the young generation is greatly overlooked. This is particularly due to the notion that young people are inexperienced and therefore only the voice of "the mature people" counts. She said that it is also often the downfall of many great ideas, because they are dismissed due to the fact that they are labeled as "too risky" or "too optimistic" just because a student came up with them.

When Maroš came across this question he was quite puzzled. This was because he was never asked such a question or ever thought about it. After a long while of thinking he only said that at least "young sportsmen" are being respected for their achievements but otherwise young generation is still being kept under the auspices of the older one in more or less its every endeavor.

There was no clear consensus among the respondents whether the potential of the young generation is being overlooked. This possibly shows just how important is the particular background of them or their social capital and demonstrates that this issue is still quite unclear and would require larger-scale research.

To sum, this report was trying to portray what are the hopes and fears of the young European generation. It has been conducted among my peers and included four participants: one university student, one high school student and two non-students. The challenges that seemed to concern them the most were the social media and the effect of the internet on the society in general, tacit prejudices which are still deep-rooted in the societal framework and the impact of the global pandemic on the collective and individual mental health. They were optimistic about what could the global connection via the internet achieve once utilized properly, about the new and improved modes of education or about various advancements in medicine. The respondents almost unanimously believe that cultural tolerance will be pivotal in the upcoming years along with innovativeness. They all however had different opinions as to whether the young generation is taken seriously or not and therefore no conclusive synthesis was able to be reached. The proper way of ending this report about the young generation would be the famous quote by Nelson Mandela: “Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great, you can be that generation.”