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VRP - why virtual can be better than real

Why a stronger youth voice is the solution to Europe's current ills and how
it can be achieved

Abstract

Europe, for much of Eastern Europe a symbol of progress and freedom is in danger of losing the social and economic foundations that make it what it is today. The current state of the political landscape in the EU member states presents itself as one of schizophrenia and lack of solution oriented European thinking. Responses to youth unemployment, low growth and educational decline tend to be protectionism, isolationism and youth-discriminating measures like the recent CPE in France. The international dimension of these problems is misunderstood and xenophobic populism and dreams about an employment miracle aggravate the problem. The citizens of Europe seem in no hurry to press their leaders to tackle the real issues facing the largest economic block in the world – instead heeding the sweet call of populism, protectionism and failing to take responsibility for the future of the most important trading partner for much of the world and the future of European youth. As this essay will argue, a major reason behind these current developments is the way in which the true voice of European youth is ignored in the political decision process - offering young people participation of the wrong sort. The true voice of young people remains shrouded by a thicket of miniature versions of established parties and special interest groups which fragment the voice of the European youth population and hinder it from pushing for solution oriented sustainable policies.

My essay centres on the idea of a virtual representation platform for young people (VRP). VRP is a basic-democratic user-driven internet platform realising the promises of e-democracy and the wiki concept in order to give young people in Europe the opportunity to transcend national boundaries and defy strong local interest groups which are keeping Europe's youth at bay and thereby endangering our future.

I will structure my essay by first explaining what problems, in my opinion, are currently pressing and the "solutions" offered by the various political groups in various member states as well as the failed participation of young people in the decision making process. I continue by describing the structural and strategic reasons that give the European youth an essential role in the future of Europe, the forces that prevent its true voice from being heard and the role of technology in a reasonable representation. Finally I show in detail the way these goals could be achieved through a virtual platform that can make the real European youth be heard and influence the political process in an unprecedented way. I will stress that the values that such a project is based on are indeed universal and that the benefits would be far more than just better representation.

One will not understand (...), if one loses out of sight that the terms “individual” and “society” do not mean two separately existing objects, but two different yet inseparable aspects of the same person (...)

Norbert Elias¹

1. Trouble in the land of plenty

In the buoyant decades of the late last century, criticism of a lack of true youth participation used to be simple enough for governments in Europe to refute simply by pointing to statistics. Seemingly all was well and young people all over Europe were happy to let their official youth interest groups represent their true interests. After all, a glance at economic data points out that average real GDP growth was nearly on par with the US in the period between 1960 and 2000 at 3,1 compared to 3,2 percent in the US. At the same time the European unemployment rate beat US levels, at 5,8 versus 6,1 percent. This so-called European miracle ended with the 1970 and sluggish growth continues today, with the 1994 to 2000 average GDP growth falling below US levels to 2,3 compared to 3,9 and the unemployment rate rising throughout Europe until today, currently at 8,1 compared to 5,1 for the US.² The youth population is particularly struck by the deteriorating state of the labour market. For instance, in Austria, a country boasting the fourth lowest unemployment rate in Europe, youth unemployment has nevertheless risen from 27 946 in 2000 to 41 568 in 2005³. Looking at the more populous EU countries, the picture becomes much more dismal, with youth unemployment rates reaching 23 percent in France and more than 30 percent in the new member states Poland and Slovakia.⁴ These figures point out that reality has caught up with Europe, the land of plenty of yore. Unsatisfactory results in the recent international secondary education ranking PISA⁵ complete the picture and point to structural deficiencies in the education sector in most of Europe, a situation apparent long ago to those willing to look more closely. Early student selection and a strong correlation of social background and school performance in the most populous EU-country, Germany, throws further doubts on the idea that the EU is ready for a world in which innovation, knowledge and flexibility are essential. The reaction to these changes has been mixed – the distinction having to be drawn between

¹ Elias, Norbert, *On the process of civilisation*, Suhrkamp 1997 (author's translation from the German edition)

² WKO Statistical Yearbook 2005

³ „Ich werde weniger verdienen als meine Eltern“, *Die Presse*, Nr. 17 441, 2006

⁴ *The Economist*, Volume 378, Number 8470, p. 27, 2006

⁵ <http://www.pisa.oecd.org/document/55>

the European and the national level. The decision made in March 2006 to introduce the CPE⁶ for citizens under 26 in France was a case in point. The seemingly well meaning proposal of the government to provide for more flexibility in the labour market backfired. The ensuing protests were misunderstood by many and deemed unjustified.⁷ Critics of the young protesters were annoyed by the rejection of a policy that would make the labour market more flexible, a move intended to help more young people find work. A closer look at the CPE makes the protest clear, however. Its aim was to liberalise the labour market only for the under 26. Considering that unemployment in France is not just a youth phenomenon, it is clear why young people are protesting to an act excluding older workers from the new policies. After all, if the measure is thought to be good for employment, why isn't it implemented in the entire population? The weak voice of the young people in Europe makes such discriminating politics at the sole expense of the European youth possible. Fragmentation of this youth on the national level and according to political parties makes young people think they are protesting for the rights of workers, when in fact they should be protesting for equal rights for all workers, young and old. A true voice of the European youth would inevitably favour sustainable solution-oriented policies – a point I will come back to throughout the text. While the European commission is pushing the member states towards more competition and openness, national politics, which are the key to European reform due to the structure of decision making in Europe are pushing through policies at the cost of young people instead of spreading the costs of reform to the entire population. A still weak parliament and a strong council of ministers make national politics elusively schizophrenic. “Brussels” has been a scapegoat for various ills for too long. At the same time, it is ignored that European politics are indeed determined by the national governments and that no way into the future can credibly walk past European or indeed international integration. Some may find this assumption too restrictive, but considering the increasing interdependence nations everywhere experience through trade, communications and crises like terrorism, nation states would be well advised to wake up and confront the international causes of unemployment and throw off the industrial mindset, rigid labour market, protectionism and a fix on national solutions to international problems. A recent example for such a strong national mindset was the decision in Austria to create a new institute for technology, to be called WIT. This project was quickly abandoned by its original creator, a renowned physicist named Anton Zeilinger, due to political bickering over the exact location of the institute. Finally, the decision was made to

⁶ contrat première embauche

⁷ The Economist, Volume 378, Number 8470, p. , 2006

locate it in a village in lower Austria – few doubt this was just a political decision. At the same time, the EC proposed the EIT, a virtual European research institute – a project having more for it than any such national solution, proposing a virtual organisation and a European dimension. I firmly believe that if the Austrian youth would have truly been asked, a European solution would turn out to be the preferred way, simply because Austria's future is European, it needs European or international solutions to future problems and research and development would surely fall into that category. But apparently, a virtual organisation far from the control centres of local politics is too dangerous for the national mindset prevalent in national politics –the idea that something physical will be controlled more effectively remains. Such a fear of international influence has a long history in Austria. In 1956, the year of Austrian accession to the EWC, neutrality was often cited as an excuse for blocking further integration and protecting the local corporatist economy⁸, based on a partition of important positions is industry between so-called reds and blacks, a still persistent arrangement. One would expect that after accession to the EU in 1995 or international obligations due to the expected participation in the EU-mission to the DR of Congo in June 2006 this year, neutrality would be yesterday's story. Unfortunately, the contrary is true for the political discourse in Austria. The term sounds well to Austrian voter ears, symbolizing independence and thus lack of responsibility for European problems. Neutrality remains a euphemism for protectionism and isolationism. Proclaiming the illusion of Austrian neutrality is followed by straightforward action, too. Recently a higher and better bid from Ukrainian bidders in a privatization deal of a local bank was blocked and the bank was sold to local businessmen, at the expense of local taxpayers but to the benefit of a reassured national psyche. This recent⁹ case is expected to land before the ECJ, as the foremost expert on public law in Austria, Prof. Heinz Mayer from the University of Vienna, pointed out. At the same time, Austrian banks are benefiting more than those of any other country from European enlargement. It is only when proclaiming the benefits to the local banking sector that EU-enlargement is largely portrayed and viewed in a good light. Such an opportunistic vision of economic conquest versus economic integration will not help Europe tear down the barriers that prohibit reform and a liveable future for its youth, prosperity for the largest trading partner for much of the world and a democratic idol to millions of would be Europeans in ex-communist countries waiting for accession.

⁸ Paul Luif in Werner Weidenfeld(ed.) *Europa-Handbuch, Volume II, Die Staatenwelt Europas*, 2004, p. 269

⁹ "Ukrainer können nicht anders" von Michael Pichlmair (*Die Presse*), 9.3.2006

Responses to the wake up calls of youth unemployment, citizen disapproval and low morale have been populist rhetoric and protectionist measures. A recent Euro barometer survey finds Austrians are the most EU-sceptic of all Europeans. At the same time, according to the WIFI, the main economic research institute in Austria, 50 percent of all jobs are directly or indirectly dependant on export. One will look hard to find pro-EU parties in Austria. Currently the social democrats, the second largest party in Austrian politics are largely riding on a wave of anti-EU populism before the November 2006 elections, a wave started by the leader of the extreme right party FPÖ. Government funded anti-EU and even racist propaganda complete the equation, since the FPÖ-related xenophobic and revisionist weekly “Zur Zeit”¹⁰, whose chief-editor Andreas Mölzer is a Member of the European Parliament and a frequent guest on *Vlaams Belang* and *Front National* events received government press funding of € 50.051,36 in 2005¹¹.

2. Youth – a minority?

Before discussing the role of Youth in the European political process it makes sense to define what I mean by youth. My idea of youth has nothing to do with the cult of beauty and fitness used by the advertising industry, nor is it a clear classification into age groups – though as I will show, practical reasons make such a classification inevitable. For me, youth is a synonym for a state of mind which is future oriented and aims to create a democratic, free and sustainable future for all. Youth is not a demarcation line between young and old - it is rather a bridge between young and old. If this is hard to believe, it is because in many cases the under and over 25 age groups frequently have opposing interests. Current political debate masques these interests behind nationalist rhetoric at large cost to Europe’s future. The term generation-contract is an example of such a conflict shaded by an euphemism suggesting the existence of such a contract, clinging to its realisation and continuation, making false hopes that young people today may benefit from such transfers in the future themselves - certainly an illusion considering demographic developments At the same time labour markets are partially liberalised through the recent aims of introducing the CPE for young people in France at the sole expense of those under 26. But even young people can be very old sometimes – when they willingly adopt the opinions and institutions their supporters and turn

¹⁰ <http://zurzeit.at>

¹¹ <http://www.rtr.at/web.nsf/>

themselves into willing executioners of irrational politics – the French rejection of the EU-constitution being a case in point.

3. Youth in the political discourse – an expert on the future!

What is the role of youth in the solutions to the challenges that Europe faces now and in the future. One may be tempted to think that young people are already well represented in local politics. After all, most Europeans under 25 have some sort of official representatives. In Austria, the B-JVG¹² of 2001 regulates their representation, giving certain organisations rights to participate in the legislative process. Another reason seemingly justifying complacency is the idea that young people are bound to mimic the interests and political values of their parents, teachers and legal representatives in general. One may even be fooled into thinking that when EU-ministers invite delegations of “youth representatives”, they are talking to *the* youth. As I will make clear in the following paragraph one can currently neither talk of true youth participation, nor of overlapping interests of young people and their parents, teachers and representatives and one can certainly only be fooled into thinking that “youth representatives” in their current form in Europe do or indeed should represent youth in a world offering the technological possibilities the European youth has at hand and the international character of the problems currently facing Europe: high youth unemployment, sluggish growth and structural deficits in the education sector.

The essential role of young people in Europe is to point to the future incessantly. Young people are indeed most entitled to uttering their views on the future as they have vital long term interest in a prosperous, peaceful and integrated Europe. They are not coming up to this task at the moment, because they remain fragmented and entangled in an array of special interest groups and their youth divisions. A strong European youth voice can be thought of as a sort of time-machine, enabling EU reform and integration to proceed faster and let tomorrows generations spurn the trappings of it’s current financiers by taking responsibility for a sustainable development themselves.

4. The “Yes, master” youth movement vs. a democratic youth movement

One can sincerely speak of a youth movement only if it is independent and has means of organizing and articulating its true position largely unhindered by important vested interests.

¹² Bundes-Jugendvertretungsgesetz (federal law for youth representation)

To exemplify the situation in Austria to an outsider, I begin with a compliment. The country has very liberal laws on the creation of grassroots organisations. This freedom ends at the latest with the realisation that independence, has two sides, an intellectual and a real. For instance, the representation of students in Austria is organised by law – why it should be organised by law could be a hotly debated question - it is seldom raised however. The public nature of student representation obviously implies that the parliament has the right to set and change the decision making process inside these organisations. Recently the election rules were changed by the governing coalition's majority – to the protest of most students. Large sums of money are transferred to wilful organisations directly from political parties – the result is predictable: such organisations monopolize so-called youth positions in various debates. Only the naive think that this creates an independent youth organisation culture. As is commonly known, well meaning does not necessarily imply well done. The youth representation act does give various organised youth organisations a voice in decision making. Yet one will search desperately for the word Europe in this law – the reason being that Europe is beyond national interest groups and certainly can't be controlled as easily as local, fragmented youth organisations. Therefore one can certainly not speak about a broad independence in youth organisations. In 2004 the direct election of the top level student representatives in Austria, the BV, was abolished by law. One of the largest fractions "representing" students did not protest this move despite overwhelming disapproval by students – it should come as no surprise that this fraction, ironically called action group in English, is largely dependant on the Austrian people's party which also recruits new members from its rows. The situation is similar at the other end of the political spectrum. One may innocently believe that this is what young people want. After all, why should they not divide into fractions and support their future party colleagues. The reason why is simply because a future free of current instabilities lies elsewhere, over party lines, namely in European politics and European solutions, something that national politics have not yet taken to heart and will take longer than Europe's young should be willing to wait.

5. Organise, but how?

Institutions are not ends in themselves. Their justification lies rather in their ability to realize the goals that are fundamental to their existence. The goal of a youth representation would simply be to point out what policies make sense as pathways to a European future, giving people freedom, employment and security in the long run and not just benefit local interest

groups. Looking at the current organisation of youth representation in Austria one is led to believe that the goal is in fact to receive as much funding from the state as possible, to prepare oneself for a jump into one of the established parties or to fight for unjustified privileges that, just to state an example, students in Austria enjoy at the expense of those young people already working and paying taxes for well earned work or vocational training. Such a misconception of the role of youth representation is dangerous for the future of Europe. But its roots lie where true youth representation ends - with fragmented so-called youth representatives, not fighting for a sustainable future, but aiding party leaders to push forward short sighted national interests, motivated by populist sentiments and opportunism. How would a meaningful youth representation look like and why would it do a better job at preparing Europe for the challenges of the future? This second question must be resolved before turning to the practical aspects of the novel form of representation I propose. An informed European youth coming together in a more direct representation process would get the sense of responsibility that is necessary for sustainable reform. This new responsibility would make it realise that solutions to problems like youth unemployment, low growth and educational troubles are indeed European and raise them onto the European scene. Being free of institutions funded by various national political parties and other interest groups it would be more representative of the true will of young people, a credible expert on the future, as I pointed out earlier. The critical mass a true European youth representation could reach would make it into a real partner in the political process, not a fragmented mirror of real politics it is today, whose “leaders” are occasionally “invited” to summits. My basic point is that it is better to have no “leaders” and a strong and large true European youth representation than a multitude of special interest groups with many illustrious “leaders” hoping to secure their careers in national elections and not to build a sustainable Europe for tomorrow’s generations. Turning to numbers makes the possibilities clear. In 2005, there were 91,7 million pupils and students, excluding pre-primary education, in the EU-25. Of these, 16,9 million were students. On average 29,1 percent of the total population in EU-25 are under 24.¹³ Finally the sheer possibility of such participation would be unprecedented and therefore its consequences could be unprecedented as well. For instance, better means of getting a voice and greater interest in European affairs would feed back into national politics, accelerating the rate of European and international thinking at home and thus bringing Europe’s citizens closer to the international solutions to its seemingly local problems. Finally, the practical aspects of such a more direct representation rely to a large degree on the internet. As common sense and recent findings

¹³ <http://epp.eurostat.ec.eu.int>

point out, the percentage of all age groups using the internet has increased in recent years; the use by those aged 16 to 34 being as high as 73 percent in 2004 compared to 24 percent of those in the 55 to 74 age groups. This makes the feasibility of a better participation of young people seem very probable.

6. Why virtual can be better than real representation

How can a meaningful representation of European youth look like in the years ahead? I have already hinted to the importance of information technology in such a representation. High internet penetration especially in the younger population makes its use plausible. At the same time, it offers the voice of European youth to reach critical mass, something that is needed if it wants to gain power in debates on the future. Finally what other means to choose than virtual communications networks, spread across Europe abundantly and extending rapidly even to the furthest regions of the Union in order to defy the influence of nationalist political parties and special interest groups that fragment the European youth? Hundreds of websites already deal with youth issues, some hosted by the EU, most by local youth representatives. Most of these internet presences are simply virtual information portals of real representation activity and strong institutions, ambitious leaders and the inherent problems I pointed to earlier. A true youth representation should *live* in a virtual environment and end the fragmentation young people's interests in Europe are suffering from. Before describing the construction of such a virtual youth representation platform (VRP) in more detail, four principles can be used to characterise it:

1. Openness

The first principle simply means that location will cease to matter. There is no reason why someone based in a small town in the Austrian province shouldn't have the same opportunity to air her voice as anyone from a large city. Every person counts and open debate should be the norm. Obviously this does not exclude the possibility of real world action. All it aims for is a large participation rate which brings us to principle number 2

2. Critical mass

A virtual youth representation can achieve something in a shorter period of time that Europe's so called youth representatives wouldn't even dare to dream about. Millions of people could cooperate on a common platform, realising the future of Europe today, when it is needed in order to offer the solution to today's problems, which are international in nature.

3. Voting

Voting is the process bringing order into the system of such a large-scale youth representation. Issues are classified according to debate intensity and participation rate. Important issues need a higher quorum in the voting process, leading to a hierarchical structure in the process of formulating positions on various topics, comparable to the structure of the legal system in many countries, the constitution standing at the top.

4. Efficiency

A system based on ideas instead of leaders will obviously not rely on cumbersome institutions at the local level for representation. The spread of information will happen quickly and cheaply, everyone will become a leader. Suddenly, European youth will become a real voice in the EU and thereby act as a time machine for solving Europe's problems on the level at which they should be solved, namely the European.

5. Public opinion

Critical mass will act in a way as to make the voice of the European youth heard all over the continent and thereby make all European citizens overcome the decade long mental opposition between nation and union in matters demanding international thinking, like employment, growth and security.

7. A blueprint for action

I have pointed out the basic principles - principles I believe most young people in Europe can accept as fundamental for any kind of representation. It is time to explore the possible construction of such a platform and to discuss a few practical problems. In its essence and in opposition to the youth platforms currently on offer in the www, the VRP will be fundamentally user driven. The obvious benefit of a user driven democracy is that individual participants will become better informed and more responsible in regard to their collective decision making. There are three perspectives to the user-driven nature of this platform. On a general level, background information on problems facing young Europeans in particular and the world in general would be user provided. A wide range of expertises from millions of young people from around Europe would be bound to create a wealth of online-knowledge of social issues right from their sources.

Examples of successful user generated content providers are wikis, websites allowing anyone visiting a site to add, remove, or otherwise edit all content, quickly and easily, often without the need for registration¹⁴. Despite occasional errors, such a system works fine, as long as

¹⁴ www.wikipedia.org

there is some control of deviant member behaviour, behaviour that can easily be minimized through registration, whose problems I will discuss further on. Another aspect of the user-driven approach of the VRP is the open debate on various problems, their solutions and common positions on important issues. The sum of all debates can be used by the platform itself to gauge the relative importance of various topics. Important topics are made public at the PC¹⁵-section of the platform. This communication can be aided by simple descriptive statistical methods. The results from various debates can either continue forever or finally come to end with a proposal for election. Proposals are selected, their popularity gauged again and various propositions are put up for vote. The vote is finally the third and integral element of the user-driven democracy the youth representation would create. According to voting participation and results the “winning” proposition is placed within a hierarchic structure on the PC-section of the platform, accessible to all and including various details of the election process (number of participants, period of discussion, discussion transcripts, main proponents etc.) The content of the PC-section is thus spread, be it by individual members or by institutions forced to take the result of such a basic democratic process into account. Obviously, assuming a critical mass, ignoring the proposals of such a European youth representation would be impossible for European leaders to ignore in the long run. There are a few minor practical problems concerning this structure, problems whose solutions are at hand and I will discuss in a question-answer dialogue. I point them out for the sake of completeness. Despite these difficulties, I believe that a virtual youth representation can indeed do a much better job at representing the interests of the European young than current “real” representation arrangements that are in place in various countries.

1. Wouldn't small countries be disadvantaged?

This problem is a case of the question being wrong. As I have pointed out, European problems need European solutions. European ideas and long-term youth thinking are the essence of the VRP, not national interests. Still, even all members coming from large nations couldn't have even simple majorities, just like in the European parliament.

2. How will young people communicate?

Not all young people in Europe can communicate in a common language. Many young people in Europe do however speak foreign languages, as Eurobarometer¹⁶ points out. Therefore even if only few speak more than one language, summaries of local language debates can be translated by individual members. Finally, the propositions that really matter, those up for

¹⁵ PC = public communication

¹⁶ http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/index_en.htm

vote, would have to be translated before being put up for vote, its correct translation also being subject to scrutiny by the community. In general, this Babylonian problem is only a temporary one and one bound to diminish with an increase in participation of European youth in their representation and the persistence of current linguistic trends.

3. Will every voter have to register?

Some form of registration will be inevitable in order for the system to function properly. Absolutely deviant behaviour, like spamming will have to lead to a suspension of specific users from the platform. Still, the actual voting process will remain anonymous and the true identity of individual debaters can be kept anonymous to the public as well.

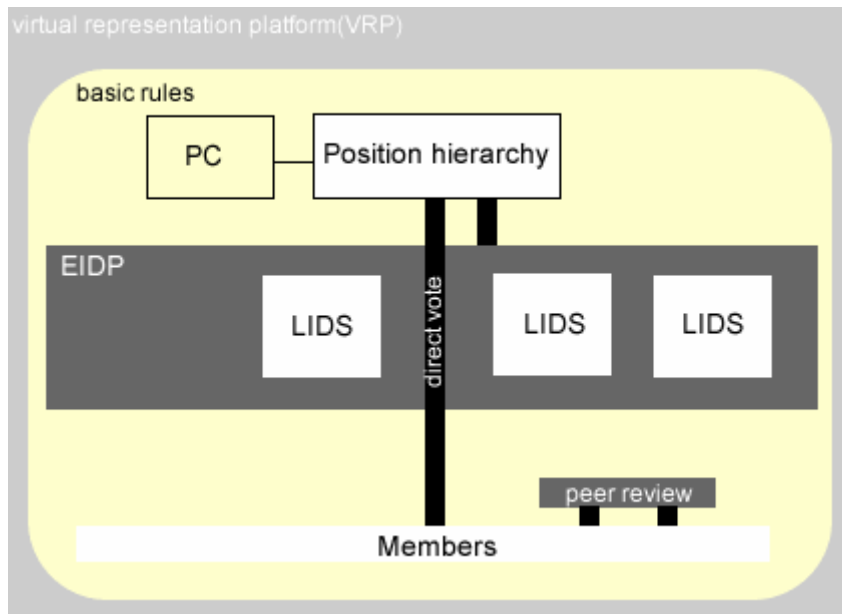
4. How much will this cost?

Considering the nature of the platform costs are bound to be very low. With no need for institutions existing for the sake of their officers, the virtual platform is much more cost-efficient than any other type of representation. Still, being a public good it needs an impetus to start.

5. People not having access to or not using the internet will be excluded from elections?

This problem can easily be reduced in severity by pointing out to the fact that votes could also be submitted via sms-voting and in most areas in Europe people will find some form of free internet access, through public libraries for example. Nevertheless, a small percentage of people will be excluded from the voting process. I argue that such exclusion will not create considerable bias in the voting results. In addition, all statistics on participation will be public and could thus be scrutinized by the public.

The following diagram illustrates the basic constitution of the VRP. EIDP standing for European Information and Debate Platform, LIDS for Local Information and Debate Platform, and PC for the Public Communication section of the platform.



8. Right time, right place

VRP would come to Europe at the right time, as Europe is currently in a process of transformation from nation state thinking to international thinking – a divide causing many of the problems we see today. This is why bringing the voice of the European youth to the EU level is essential in order to accelerate reform and let young people participate in their future, which is unarguably European. At the same time, the internet makes a wide representation of the European young possible and its increasing penetration feasible. Thus a basic democratic VRP can contribute considerably to resolving the problems Europe is facing at the beginning of the 21. century and thereby increase stability and aid sustainable development in the entire world.