WHAT'S STOPPING US?

FRESH THINKING
on young people
and society

Reflection 3 of a series of 4:
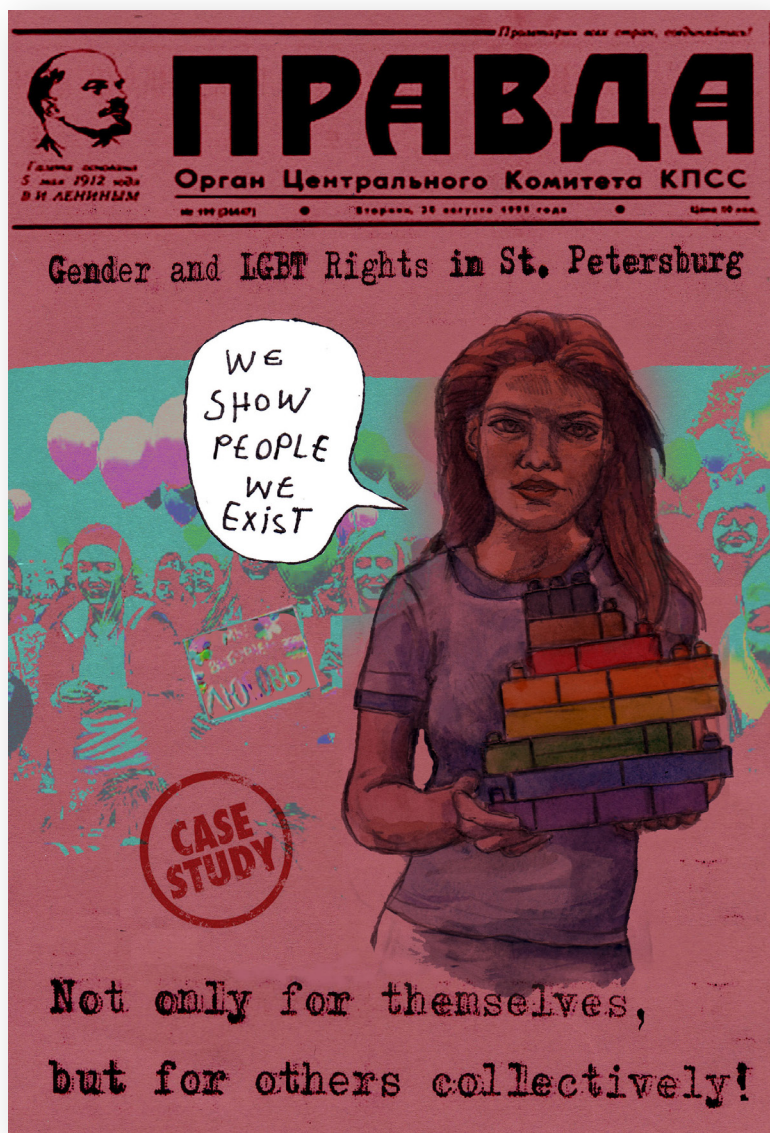
THOUGHTS ON
INEQUALITY

Research findings, data, and case
studies from 10 countries which
shed light on the issues and make
recommendations for change.

PROMISE

INEQUALITY

Why every small step is a big leap forward

Education, income, environment – all these factors (and more) can determine how active young people are in mainstream society. But are society's least engaged young people as disinterested as they seem? Are we paying enough attention to the true circumstances of their lives and do we sometimes fail to notice small actions that are – even if we don't realise it – social engagement?

By analysing the latest research and data, interviewing young people, and seeking out thought-provoking, real-world examples, we know there is huge potential to turn mistrust and apathy into powerful, positive change.

Across Europe and beyond, by having a better understanding of young people's lives and what motivates and frustrates them, we can build stronger, more cohesive communities for the future.

This is just a very short reflection from a major three-year project. If it inspires you to find out more (and there is much more information available), we tell you where and how on page 13.

Under the theme of inequality, read on, for some:

● top-line reflections and findings

● what young people had to tell us

● what we can do about it (recommendations for change)

You may also wish to read our other three reflections from this project on the following themes: **Systems**, **Labels** and **Engagement**.

" I always had a million things to think about while I was growing up because we had to face a lot of problems … my mum separating from my dad because of his drug addiction and stuff like that…To take my mind off things all I wanted to do was go out and have fun. "
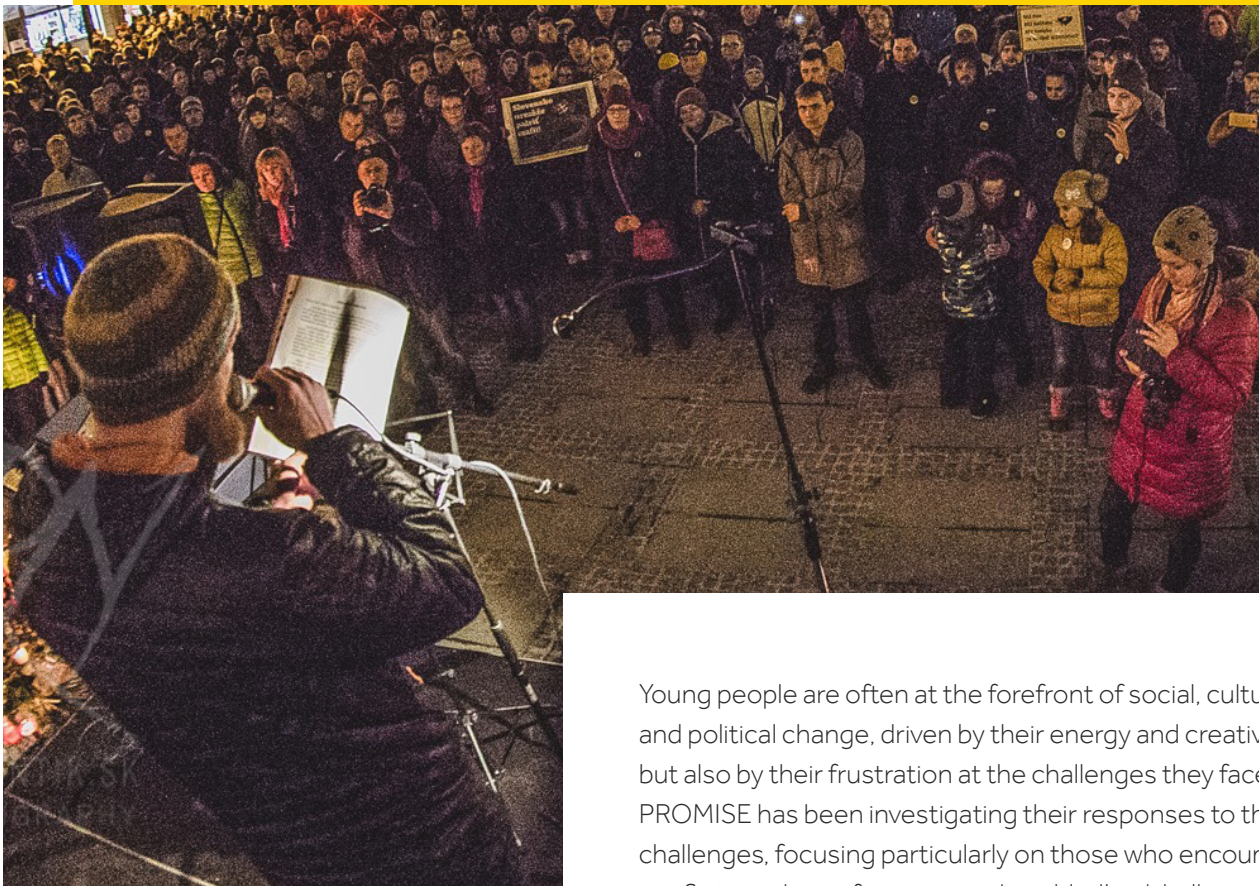
Paolo, male, 20, Italy.

THE PROMISE PROJECT

An introduction

PROMISE (Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement) is a major EU-funded research project exploring young people's role in shaping society: past, present, and future.

Young people are often at the forefront of social, cultural, and political change, driven by their energy and creativity, but also by their frustration at the challenges they face. PROMISE has been investigating their responses to these challenges, focusing particularly on those who encounter conflicts and are often seen as 'troubled' or 'challenging'.

Through a better understanding of the experiences, values and attitudes of European youth and those young people least heard by decision-makers, PROMISE got to the heart of the barriers and opportunities for social engagement and stronger societies.

THE PROMISE PROJECT

Fact and figures

12
PARTNER ORGANISATIONS
including universities, NGOs
(non-governmental organisations),
research and educational institutes
from across Europe

10
COUNTRIES
INVOLVED
Croatia, Estonia, Finland,
Germany, Italy, Portugal, Slovakia,
the Russian Federation, Spain,
and the UK

3
YEARS OF IN-DEPTH
RESEARCH
beginning in 2016 and concluding in 2019

22
REAL-LIFE PROJECT
CASE STUDIES
GATHERED

12,666
SURVEY RESPONSES
comparing social and political
engagement across the
generations

A MIXED METHODS APPROACH
quantitative data to explore differences in youth
attitudes and behaviour across Europe; ethnographic and
participatory research methods to look more closely at
youth engagement and innovation

POWERFUL TESTIMONIES
gathered from hundreds of young people
aged 13-32, with older respondents looking
back on their younger years

ANALYSIS
of existing data involving around 8,500 young people

RECOMMENDATIONS
practical, take-home recommendations for
policy makers and stakeholders

> "They just see young people and think, 'They know nothing,' or 'They're too young to know anything.' A lot of us know a lot more than most people. We've been through, lived through, a lot more than most people and I hate that we get judged because of our age…"

Becki, female, 18, UK.

OPPORTUNITY

A key driver for engagement

No two countries are the same and our project covered 10 countries, all with very different histories, economies, population features and political, cultural, and social systems. These differences affect the opportunities available for the whole population, and of course deeply affect the young people who grow up in them.

Despite the differences, however, many clear themes and findings emerged:

Education makes a clear difference to young people's levels of engagement.

Young people not engaging in education are less likely to seek information on social and political issues or be active in these areas.

Some of the young people we spoke to talked of teachers giving up on them and being made to feel, or even told, that they were going to fail. Many were subject to exclusion from school, sent to special educational units or forced to access reduced timetables. Usually these young people had grown up in one of their country's most socially and economically-deprived communities.
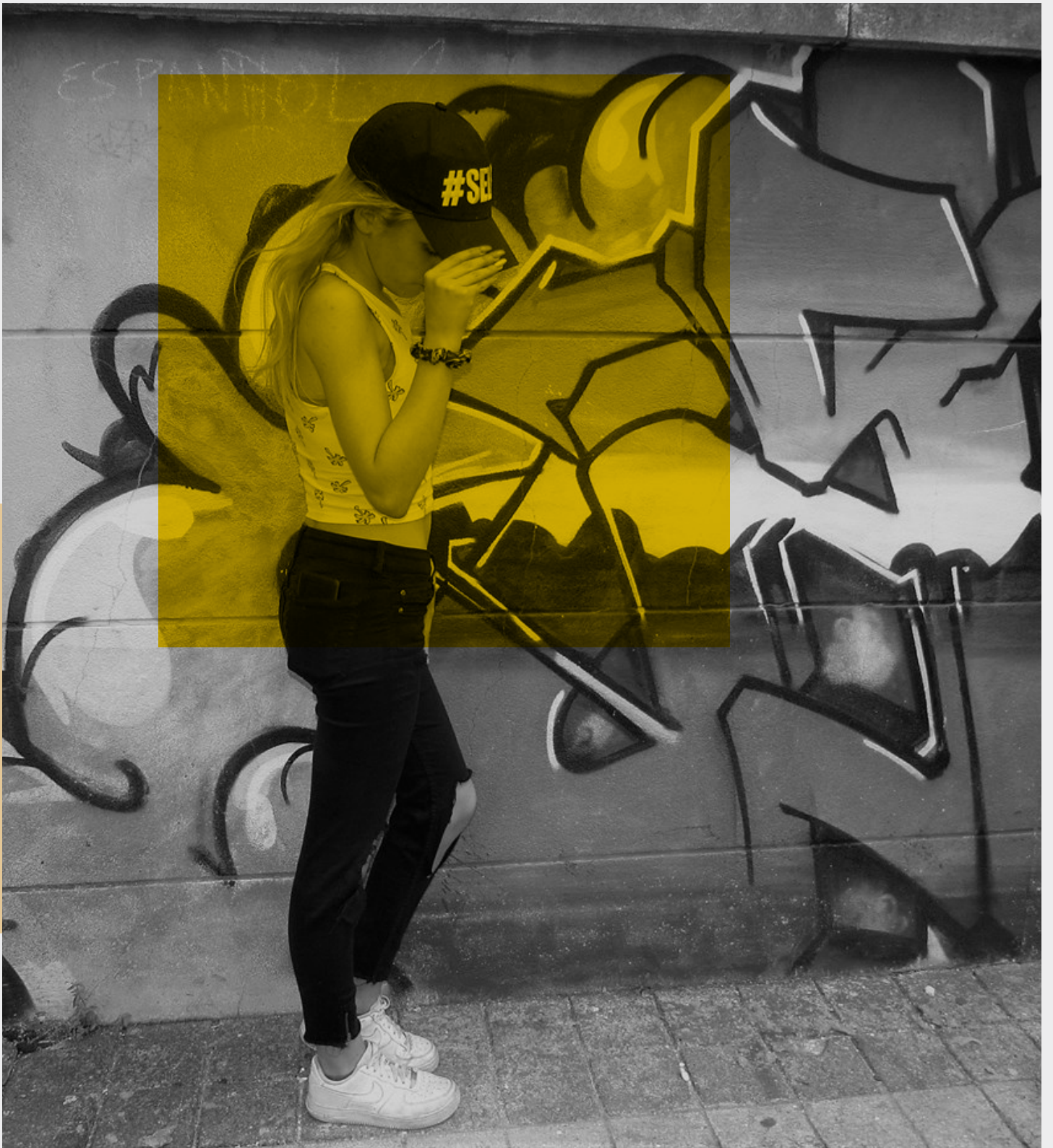
Parents can play a key role in levels of youth engagement.

The level of a parent's education makes a difference, but even more important than this is whether the family talks about and engages with social and political issues. This is a key factor in determining how likely a young person is to be active in mainstream society.

Young people who are in an environment where social and political issues are discussed, learn about them, and gain greater confidence and interest in engagement. Many young people, however, don't have this opportunity at home, or elsewhere.

Experiencing trust in others, and in government and authority figures, increases young people's levels of engagement and activism.

More than institutions, our research showed that it's the power of positive, trusting relationships with individual people that makes the biggest difference. In addition to family relationships, those in authority - youth workers, social workers, or teachers for example - can make a big impact. If positive and trusting, these relationships can make life-changing differences to our most vulnerable and disengaged young people.

Seeing engagement through young people's eyes

Priorities

We may think of youth as a time in life that's free of responsibility, but this is not the case for many young people. Some shoulder great responsibility and it's not surprising if engagement with society and politics slips to the bottom of their priorities.

In Finland, for example, our researchers looked at the experiences of a group of young mothers, many of whom came from other cultures where it was more common to become a parent at a younger age. This profound change in life was mostly welcomed, but was against the norm in the society they live in. It had huge implications for their levels of engagement in wider society and they appeared not to have any desire to get organised or strive for more rights for themselves. They did, however, see themselves as citizens who were contributing to society through parenthood.

Freedom to choose?

The life paths of young people vary enormously. The direction of a young person's life is less about choice, more something shaped by a complex set of factors, including the environment they are born into and grow up in.

A study into a group of young people in Italy found that crime and drugs permeated their entire lives and were the reasons they didn't have families to guide and support them. They were fully aware of their situation and this neighbourhood and its problems had an impact on everything. The values, role models and negative habits learned from living there became their 'grounding' and identity, one that gave a strong and important sense of belonging but one characterised by marginalisation and exclusion from the rest of society.

Unequal treatment

Inequality can mean less access to services and resources, sometimes this is simply a result of being young and not being taken seriously. In addition, young people who face discrimination become increasingly aware of it as they get older. This can be because of race, religion, sexuality or simply because they are viewed with suspicion and seen as 'risky'.

Our researchers talked to a group of Russian LGBTQ young people who lived in fear of homophobic attacks, physical violence, and pressure from the homophobic population. One, for example, was an activist for gender, sexuality, and human rights, but was avoiding taking part in public actions because she feared it might jeopardise her hope of becoming a teacher. In Germany, young Muslim women explained how the decision to wear a headscarf was a conscious personal decision, a strong act of engagement with their faith that they were proud of. Yet they knew they were also opening themselves up to possible rejection, greater difficulty (for example, at school or when applying to enter a profession) and, at times, hostility.

"When we were young we used a play centre that belongs to the town hall but is managed by a private company. It's a public facility but…what happens? Once you turn 16, you cannot do activities anywhere…we did not have anything in the neighbourhood, and we said 'okay, we are going to set up an association!'"

Miguel, male, 18, Spain.

FIVE WAYS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

1

Create opportunities for expression.

Young people at risk of difficult or deviant paths desperately need the opportunity to express their identities, points of view, experiences, and positive traits within educational, care and justice institutions. Encouraging participation, side-by-side with peers and adults, in cooperative activities and projects can help overcome stereotypes, promote mutual trust, and foster positive expectations.

2

Enable self-determination.

Encouraging self-determination in young people who have lacked opportunities is key to building self-esteem and positive social involvement. This can encourage re-engagement in education, a rejection of crime, and the development of new life goals. Young people value the opportunity to make choices and they become more engaged when they feel it's a result of their free will and commitment to change. Young people should be involved in the discussion, choice, and development of activities in all educational, social, welfare and justice contexts.

3

Invest in the most vulnerable.

Most young people who become the object of state interventions, for example educational or youth justice measures, come from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly socially-deprived urban neighbourhoods. They face greater socioeconomic vulnerability from the moment they are born, and they need to be supported by specific social and educational policies to help overcome these inequalities.

4

Take a wider definition of engagement.

Our research suggests that engagement exists where we might not see it. When a young person is living in extremely difficult circumstances, just getting up and taking their child to a park, or getting themselves to school or college, is a strong indicator of engagement. We also need to consider that alternative communities, including those involved in criminal activity, show young people are motivated to engage, have a strong need to belong, and need better opportunities. It's also worth considering that even a refusal to engage is a sign of self-determination and can be a reaction to a lifetime of profound inequality.

5

Consider conflict as opportunity.

Our research showed that situations of conflict can be viewed as chances for negative relationships with authority to change. This can only happen where young people feel they have been listened to and supported with the intention of channelling conflict into positive action. We found strong examples where youth in conflict with mainstream society showed they can be remarkably adept at organising themselves, for example in squatted homes, self-organised youth centres, artistic groups and more.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Visit the PROMISE website where you can:

- Read any of the 22 case studies, searchable by country.

- View analysis of our case studies by 'Cluster' theme (Education, Justice and Society; Culture and Politics; Economy, Leisure and space; and Gender and Sexuality).

- Read policy briefs for each case study, giving clear recommendations for policy change.

- View the quantitative data the project analysed, looking at European or country-specific facts and figures and country and European-wide reports on the wider context.

Connect with us

You can also connect with us on Twitter @H2020PROMISE and via our website **www.promise.manchester.ac.uk** to help raise awareness, share, and discuss the issues raised. We welcome your thoughts and insights.

Acknowledgements