

*From the analysis of the main political conflict lines tearing apart the EU, to the issue of populism. From the relation between economic and social Europe, to the evaluation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Young leaders from the **JEF, YES, AEGEE, ETUC and EYF**, debate the state of the Union and possible developments in the upcoming months leading to the European Parliamentary elections of 2019.*

*EuVisions met **Ivan Butina** [VOLT Europe], **Philipp Tzaferis** [Vice-President Young European Socialists], **Thiébaut Weber** [Confederal Secretary ETUC], **Jacopo Barbati** [Vice president of JEF Europe], **Loes Rutten** [AEGEE President], **Kristen Aigro** [Board Member European Youth Forum] in Strasbourg on the occasion of the **Yo!Fest2018** and the **EYE2018**.*

EuVisions: North vs South, East vs West, Supranational vs National, Left vs Right: how do you perceive this lines of conflict in Europe? Which one do you think is the most relevant? And why?

Ivan Butina: The traditional conflict between left and right parties is losing its centrality. For instance, let's look at the case of Italy. You have souveranist parties which often propose leftist economic policies. On the other hand, centre-left wing parties, like the Democratic Party (PD) are sustained by the bourgeoisie. So what's left of the classical "left-right" clash? In my understanding, the north-south conflict line is the most relevant nowadays in Europe. It suffices to see how important the issue of debt is and "who decides" about its sustainability or potential restructuring. Many citizens are voting for anti-European parties or Eurosceptic parties because the latter blame northern countries for their economic conditions. Often, however, this way of doing politics is not based on facts solely, but on perceptions, which, in turn, are often drivers of specific voting behaviours. That's why we need pan-European parties and pan-European politics to bridge different forces and create a new consensus around political, economic and social policies. Leaving this task in the hands of traditional parties, however, would imply never being able to reach a federal or more united Europe. We need political platforms whereby people from different countries can interact and create mutual understanding.



Ivan Butina [VOLT Europe], at the centre of the picture

Loes Rutten: Another layer to add to Ivan’s description, is the emergence of populism. We can observe central parties confronted by populist forces both on the left and the right. Thus, we have new forms of polarisation. Talking about Euroscepticism, it’s not only a matter of finding a “scapegoat”. Facts tell us that there are people that have directly benefited from the European integration and the freedoms it came with, and others who haven’t. I think that all the aforementioned lines of conflict boil down to this experience somehow. We really need to understand if Europe is something that can be beneficial to all of its citizens, and if this is not the case yet, we urgently need to move in that direction.

“The four lines of conflict are manifestations of another

divide between those are advantaged and those who suffer, those who are more informed and connected and those who are not. I would use the connotation of “winners Vs losers” of the globalisation”, Thiébaud Weber, Confederal Secretary ETUC

Jacopo Barbati: I agree that the distinction between left and right is not relevant anymore. Better said, progressive and reactionary forces relate themselves ever more pro-integration and anti-integration stances. We have both communist and right-wing parties that are against the European Union and the Euro. For what concerns the geographical divides (north-south, east-west, etc.) they are undoubtedly relevant, but their influence on the political debate depends on specific regional contexts. That said, Loes is right in saying that there are other dynamics at play, but the winner-loser distinction does not explain specific national dynamics, such as the Hungarian. People in Hungary have largely benefited from the European Union, and still, the political discussion is all about how the EU is having an impact on citizens' lives. The electoral campaign in Hungary was centred around the issue of “invasion”. In this specific case, the main conflict line shaping the political debate was “supranational authorities against national prerogatives”.

Thiébaud Weber: The four lines of conflict are manifestations of another divide between those are advantaged and those who suffer, those who are more informed and connected and those who are not. I would use the connotation of “winners Vs losers” of the globalisation. Moreover, and consequently, I believe urban areas VS rural areas divide is all the more essential to understand political outcomes.

Kristen Aigro: There is yet another cleavage no one has mentioned so far, namely young VS old. It suffices to mention the common statement that our generation will experience worse living-conditions than our parents. More specifically, we'll be the first generation earning less than our parents. Nevertheless, we are the most educated generation ever. Inter-generational concerns are and will be essential to understand political developments in Europe.

Philipp Tzaferis: Similarly to what Thiébaud said, in my understanding the divide between the rich and the poor, the haves and have-nots, or, if you want, between Labour and Capital, continues to structure all the different phenomenological clashes you described.

Consequently, we have to find new ways to debate how our economy works. This does not imply that the specified lines of conflict are not relevant to provide good politics. But they are not structuring our society.

EuVisions: Which one, between the economic and the social dimension of the EU, is more prominent? Both, in practice and in theory? Why is this so according to your viewpoint? Over the past few years, there has been much talk about structuring a better Social Europe. How do you evaluate the steps that have been made so far?

Kristen Aigro: Definitely. The freedom of movement and to find a job everywhere in the Union needs to be completed with a set of guarantees, of social rights which must be equal for all. The EU must spur the development of its social dimension.



Kristen Aigro [Board Member European Youth Forum]

Ivan Butina: The EU project has been primarily economic until now. This is not to say that its economic policies do not need to be improved. But the social and political dimensions have been left out of the picture. In the face of many propositions, little actions were undertaken. But thinking about the development of social policies we have to keep in mind that we have

different levels of welfare across the Union, depending on each national context. Moreover, we need to rethink how welfare works and should work from scratch. I would say that, as Europeans, we have a mission to do this, jointly with developing science-driven policies for the environment. The centrality of the environment and of welfare in Europe is distinctive feature distinguishing us from the United States of America. In Europe, even centre-right parties take for granted that a welfare system is a necessity. Nevertheless and again, work has changed, and so needs to do our welfare system: we need to modernise it.

“At this point in time, with a crisis that is still unfolding its effects, institutional reforms would be impossible to achieve. We need immediate political decisions and programs to be taken up by current policymakers. For instance, why don't we challenge the mandate of the ECB?”, Philipp Tzaferis, Vice-President Young European Socialists

Loes Rutten: I totally agree that there is a lack of “structure” in the EU that depends on the fact we have focused so much on economics. For example, when many Eastern countries accessed the EU, many foreseeable imbalances emerged. These should have been tackled from the outset by means of a collective social framework. We urgently need a streamlining of social policies.

Philipp Tzaferis: The development of more and better social policies in Europe is necessary but not sufficient to overcome its structural weakness. We have to revise the way our economic policies work. If the latter continue to be managed mainly at the national level, without any significant form of coordination, divides will grow. Nowadays, the free movement of people in the EU is turning into a “brain drain” at the expense of Southern countries. These are issues that can only be tackled by the coordination of economic policies.

Thiébaud Weber: The main shortcoming of the European Union, was thinking that the Single Market on its own would lead to a dynamic of convergence. Although it is true that, in history, many people came together to trade with each other increasing their welfare, this is not enough to create stable societies. To obtain an economic and social convergence, we need a

political strategy, which, at the moment, is lacking. Off course, we have institutionalised the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), but the latter can only be a basis for the discussion we need to have at the political level to develop a more profound “social action”. The competition between people within the Single market should not become the driver of a worsening of living conditions.

Jacopo Barbati: Deep institutional reforms are essential. We can go on forever in discussing the policies we would like to have, but if there are no concrete opportunities to drive promote these reforms, the discussion is fruitless. We need proper federal institutions. Many policies are decided and run either at a national level or at best, at an inter-governmental level, a method that has proved to be a failure. Here we stand, and we won't go anywhere. In the long-term, we need a federal Union. In the short term, however, we could think about having European tax-resources filling up a budget which can be called “effective”. Our current Multiannual Financial Framework is just not doing the job, the size of our collective economy would require.

Philipp Tzaferis: At this point in time, with a crisis that is still unfolding its effects, institutional reforms would be impossible to achieve. We need immediate political decisions and programs to be taken up by current policymakers. For instance, why don't we challenge the mandate of the ECB? Why can't we think about an ECB that is ensuring as well employment levels, besides inflation targets? For such a change, we need just a change of statute of the ECB, which is a political decision. Not institutional reforms. It would be a mistake to think that there aren't actions we could endorse within the current framework.

Jacopo Barbati: Yet, I think that you can have profound institutional change only in time of crisis. We need to seize this opportunity, this window of change made up of countries and citizens who are questioning the fundamental structure of the EU. If we do not enact this change, we don't know if we will ever have a chance again.

EuVisions: In November 2017, the EU institutions and the governments approved the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in Gothenburg. How do you evaluate this innovation?

Thiébaut Weber: It is the first step. I am not saying that is not relevant as such, but we should look carefully at what comes next.

Loes Rutten: It's definitely important. But we need to take into consideration the interaction of this social progress with economic policymaking. That is to say, we need to keep an eye on the multi-governance structuring of the EU. So it turns out that we need a vision of how all these different policies can stay together. We cannot just add layer after layer to the structure. We must be more visionary.

*“I would like to link the evaluation of the EPSR with the economic transformation we are experiencing. Rights are fundamental, but we need to have new platforms for all stakeholders of the economy on top of that”, Ivan Butina,
VOLT Europe*

Ivan Butina: I would like to link the evaluation of the EPSR with the economic transformation we are experiencing. Rights are fundamental, but we need to have new platforms for all stakeholders of the economy on top of that. Otherwise, how can we serve those workers' categories that are not conventional, like the “riders” of the gig economy? Which is precisely what happened in the city of Bologna, where gig-economy workers that were not represented by the trade unions had to organise themselves and engage in a dialogue with the municipality. That's how a new civic- and political platform came about. The latter was instrumental to the definition of a new charter of rights for these workers. The world and the economy are changing, and we need to reframe what a social right actually is and define effective welfare policies and tools.

Thiébaud Weber: Nevertheless, I would argue on this, and state that Italy is the country where trade unions — jointly with German ones — managed to sign an agreement with Deliveroo and Foodora establishing workers' council within these companies. Off course trade unions are challenged because the world of work is changing with the platform economy and everything that comes with it. But I think that, compared to a few years ago, European level organisations and trade unions made huge steps forward in dealing with these phenomena.

A dialogue on Europe: young leaders debate the present and future of
the Union. Interview
By Alexander Damiano Ricci



Thiébaut Weber [Confederal Secretary ETUC]

Philipp Tzaferis: I don't see any particular novelty in this dynamic. If we look at the history of welfare, workers had always to organise themselves to create a counter-power to business interests, which took the form of trade unions at a certain point in time.

EuVisions: Growing divides, social policies who are lacking behind economic priorities, don't you think sometimes that we are running out of time?

Thiébaut Weber: I don't know if we are too late, but I know that I am too young to say it is the end of the story. I keep being optimistic. Because we plan to influence the status quo. We know how tricky it is, but it won't stay as it is. Somehow, things will move.

"I believe that many people still do care about Europe, that believe in this joint journey. We need to be smart in understanding the right way forward", Loes Rutten, AEGEE President

Kristen Aigro: It doesn't really matter if it is too late because such reasoning doesn't lead us anywhere. We cannot get back in time and change things that were made in the past. We can only influence the future.

Loes Rutten: I believe that many people still do care about Europe, that believe in this joint journey. We need to be smart in understanding the right way forward.

Philipp Tzaferis: Too late for what exactly? For the existence of the European Union as we know it? For keeping all Member States on board as of pre-Brexit? If we posit the question, making reference to the future of the EU, I think there is no other answer, but that we have to fight for it. Yet, it is clear that we need to rebuild the trust that has been broken through wrong political decisions. I am thinking of Greece in 2015 and of the migrant crisis.



Philipp Tzaferis [*Vice-President Young European Socialists*]

Ivan Butina: It will take the time it takes to make the best out of this Union. But the younger generation should be motivated to move forward, to work on it day by day. Of course, we had the financial crisis first and then Brexit. But so we experienced the elections of Macron who indeed represented a sharp break for nationalism tendencies. I believe that the French elections were a message: “We need to do something, and we need to do it now”. Nevertheless, to be honest, there is an issue where I feel like, we are running out of time, namely the fight against climate change.

EuVisions: Do you think populism is a problem? If you think so, why?

Jacopo Barbati: I think that populism is an issue as long as nationalism is one of its central elements. The EU is almost always a scapegoat for these forces. We are living in complex times, and populists simplify every bit of politics. On top of that, we are experiencing a technological revolution, where communication flows are based on concise messages. The simpler the answer to a political issue, the catchier it is. The downside of this is that we escape reality. Populists have proved to be the best political actors in adapting to this new

environment.

“We have as well populist mainstream leaders who are not against supranational institutions, and who, nevertheless, should not be considered as a model either”, Kristen Aigro, Board Member European Youth Forum

Kristen Aigro: There are even other kinds of populism than those we talk about most of the time. Look at Justin Trudeau in Canada. He might be a reference for those who hold progressive beliefs, but the truth is that his policies don't really reflect that claim. It's just another leader distracting us employing good PR. This is to say that we have as well populist mainstream leaders who are not against supranational institutions, and who, nevertheless, should not be considered as a model either.

Ivan Butina: The answer to the question depends pretty much on how we define populism? If we look at it as a strategy of simplifying messages and playing with people's emotions, I think that we are indeed in front of a problem for democracy. Wherever it may come from, whatever its target or political colour: it's just wrong. The more complex society becomes, the likelier it is that decision making is perceived as distant. As a consequence, citizens feel that their voices unheard. And even less, do citizens they to take up responsibility for their own future. Democracy becomes an empty box. And on top of this dynamic populist forces thrive. It is for this reason that it is so important that we go back to grassroots level, to our neighbourhoods and rural areas to provide a new form of politics. Online presence is excellent, but not enough. We need to listen to people for real. And empathy will play a key role. We need to invest in people, and start to practice community organising.

Loes Rutten: Populism is problematic, but it's a symptom, not the problem itself. We need to start cut its roots, which implies enacting better social policies and move out our comfort zones. Populism is as well the result of the establishment of new kind of media.



Loes Rutten [AEGEE President]

Philipp Tzaferis: I agree that populism is the symptom of a broader problem. Some policies do not provide goods matching people's needs. I don't see successful populist movements arguing for welfare cuts and more neoliberal policies. That's why we need to address economic and social policies first.

Thiébaut Weber: The problem with populism is simplism. It doesn't lead anywhere. As soon as the populist movements are close to power, they face reality. Look at Italy: how will the government finance the policies it pledged for? Not to speak of the fact that they turned a basic income into an actual unemployment benefit. This is to say that simplistic ideas do not strengthen democratic debates. We need to assure that the microphone is not always and only in the hands of those who shout louder. At the same time, we should not fall into the trap of over-simplification as a reaction to populism, say believing that citizens are stupid. Our trade unionist who are active within companies, do not turn employees against employers for the sake of it, on the base of simplistic slogans. They usually take hours to

debate with the workers about complex things like market sector dynamics and globalisation, besides representing them in their social struggles.

Ivan: Let's keep in mind, however, that there are populists who, even if confronted with real issues and power, get re-elected. Think of Orban.

Philipp Tzaferis: I believe as well that people are not stupid. But at the same time, if we look at the past, at the development of the welfare model, there are some fundamental questions — and thus answers — that need to be dealt with and given. For instance, we cannot escape fundamental questions such as: should a critical economic or social sector of a national economy be publicly owned or not? In the back of the organisation, there is complexity off course and discussion, but there are basic principles which need to be brought to the front line of the political debate.

Thiébaud Weber: I think that most of the people know about the distinction between public and private service provisions and ownership. But the point is that often the very same people don't feel to have control over these goods, even in the case of public ownership. And this is why we need to find better solutions. This perception and state of the art is precisely what is challenging organisations like trade unions nowadays. We need to understand the reasons for particular economic and social developments and discuss them thoroughly with workers.

EuVisions: It looks like the battle for the next European elections will be told as a fight between pro-European fronts and anti-European alliances. How do you plan to structure your campaign? Would it be possible to imagine cooperation between your organisations/parties/movements?

Ivan Butina: VOLT puts to the fore the concept of “community organising”. The idea took off in the USA, but actually, Europeans have been doing it forever in politics. I think there is not much time left right now to structure resilient campaigns on our own. I am afraid that all of us are going to do just fancy advertisement talks in Brussels, in national capitals at best. It goes without saying that this is the wrong approach. We should campaign in the geographical and social peripheries of our Continent. In Austria, where — think about it — even a neo-fascist movement like Casa Pound is making its moves. Or in Eastern Germany, where the AFD is taking the lead. That's what we would be doing. This is the frontline of Europe, whether you

are centre-left, or centre-right: we need some sort of trans-party alliances. 65 per cent of our members has never been politically affiliated before joining VOLT. We have a triangle membership: liberal (Alde), social democrats (S&D) and Greens, all fused into a progressive platform. So we would work together with all these political forces somehow. If the objective was the election of 2025, VOLT could go for it on its own, but looking at the elections of 2019 we need to unify our resources.

Loes Rutten: We are preparing our WhyVote campaign, encouraging young people to take active part in the next European elections. Through our own network, we try to reach as many people outside of it as well. However, our vision goes beyond 2019, concerning agenda setting and policy making. Talking about potential synergies, we could follow the path suggested by VOLT, but I think that if everyone focuses on his audience-segment, we can do a good job.

Jacopo Barbati: JEF is not a party, but a movement which is trans-party by its own definition. We have a vast network of groups across Europe. As such we do not have our own candidates running for the elections. However, we will interact with candidates of other parties, challenging their vision for Europe.

Picture Jacopo

Thiébaut: We do not choose our counterparts, neither within companies nor at the political level. This is, of course, channelling for us. But we are not meant to influence the political outcome of an election, but deal with the consequences of it, regarding workplace dynamics. Trade unions will be there any way to take the side of workers. The real question for us, at any moment in time — be it in front of a populist government, or not — is understanding if civil society coalitions are sustainable and robust enough to play their part in the political game.

Philipp Tzaferis: Starting from the very definition of populism given in the questions, namely to be opposed to the EU integration process, we can't but understand why populist have success. What are their receipts? In this sense, I am not sure that they have success because they are anti-European. What matters is the political message the bring and lands at the local level. People see the European Union as being a model that forces social policies and economic policies away from real needs. That's why our answers can only be political. And so I come as well to the question of trans-party alliances, or: could we work together on this? Given the composition of VOLT, for instance, I could hardly imagine a shared political

battle.

“We are living in complex times, and populists simplify every bit of politics. On top of that, we are experiencing a technological revolution, where communication flows are based on concise messages. The simpler the answer to a political issue, the catchier it is. The downside of this is that we escape reality”, Jacopo Barbati, Vice president of JEF Europe

Ivan Butina: But what if the main issue is “nationalism against Europeanism”?

Philipp Tzaferis: Even in the case this was the critical questions of the debate, I think that we would need to go deeper into political decisions and policies to make ourselves understood to citizens. To campaign pro- or anti-Europe would bring nothing to the democratic debate, to the people, last but not least to voting decisions.

Thiébaut Weber: Yet, I think there are spaces for ad-hoc coalitions on specific issues. I believe that citizens will call for a unification of parties on particular topics. I am not talking GroKo here, because we know how harmful it can be to a democratic system. But again, on some points, people are expecting you to look for compromises.

Philipp Tzaferis: I can agree on this, but we should not turn the next European elections into a pro- or anti-Europe consultation.

Ivan: Instead, I think that we can all find what brings us together as Europeans and thus defeat nationalist forces.

Jacopo Barbati: I believe that this line of conflict will become ever more relevant. Which does not imply, however, that we should hesitate from digging deeper into what it means to be pro-European.

EuVisions: How would you define solidarity in Europe?

Ivan Butina: To not leave anyone behind and caring about the other in a way that all of us can have the same opportunities.

Jacopo Barbati: To share resources to reach a common result.

Loes Rutten: To me, solidarity in Europe, is linked as well to the fact that we share the same geographical location. It means accepting our differences and consequently be realistic about what we can expect from each other. Solidarity means also stop thinking about ourselves as constrained by borders, and instead as human beings living on the same continent.

Thiébaut Weber: Solidarity means sharing wealth and challenges at the same time. The so-called migrant crisis is a very good example in case. The latter was not created by the migrant themselves, but by the politician who has been able to deal with and decline the notion of solidarity.

Philipp Tzaferis: In the European context, I would be tempted to give a negative definition of the concept, namely: no country should be able to lower the economic and social living standards of its populations in a way that it triggers phenomena like forced migration. In other terms, solidarity between Member States is not sufficient, we need to look as well at how our economic policies interact and how each actor's move has effects on the populations of other countries.

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