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**1st International Alumni Seminar  
of the Council of Europe Schools of Political Studies**

**“Harnessing young people’s potential for building a democratic future”  
19-20 June 2014, Strasbourg**

**Palais de l’Europe, Room 13**

**REPORT**

**Introduction**

Thorbjørn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, welcomed the participants and highlighted the important role alumni already play in their countries to spread the values and ideas explored in Schools of Political Studies. He expressed his hopes that this first international alumni seminar will build the foundations for more sustained co-operation amongst the alumni community and with the Council of Europe to build a democratic future based on the *acquis* and values of the Council of Europe.

The Secretary General recalled that the Schools are an important asset for the Council of Europe through their work to foster democratic values and standards, bridge religious, ethnic, social and political barriers, and create a healthy climate of dialogue and mutual understanding. The Schools have also proven their ability to deliver confidence building measures through their activities within individual countries and through bilateral and regional activities. In this way they have contributed to reconciliation in divided regions.

The Secretary General was pleased to note that the meeting participants were made up of outstanding young leaders from different Schools and different annual cycles, ranging from politicians, business and civil society leaders, academics, journalists and opinion leaders.

He invited the participants, many of whom have first-hand experience of youth issues, to use this opportunity to explore ways to respond to the marginalisation of young generations. Topics to be explored in the seminar include: the disparity between young people's aspirations and forms of engagement on the one hand, and the limited opportunities for influence on the other; the mismatch between the ideals of young people – such as social justice and equality – and the priorities of democratic decision-making; whether young people can define their own set of common values for the future. Mr Jagland concluded with his expectation that the outcomes of the seminar discussions will provide useful ideas for the participants in their work, as well as providing valuable input to the 2014 session of the World Forum for Democracy in Strasbourg in November on ‘From Participation to Influence: Can Youth Revitalise Democracy?’

Catherine Lalumière, President of the European Association of Schools of Political Studies, former Secretary General of the Council of Europe, recalled the dramatic changes which took place in Europe during her mandate as Secretary General of the Council of Europe. She spoke of the essential work being undertaken by the Schools of Political Studies today, all the more so in this period of crisis and growing nationalism. The Schools offer an important element of response to these threats through education in democratic values and by helping young, democratic leaders to emerge.

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**Day I: “The marginalisation of today’s young generation: Is the pact between the generations broken?”**

***Session 1: Making youth concerns a top priority***

Tina Mulcahy, Head a.i. of the Council of Europe’s Youth Department, introduced the participants to the Organisation’s youth activities which are governed by a co-decision management body to ensure that youth are involved in all stages of decision-making. The Council of Europe endeavors to integrate the young generations into its political agenda and has at its disposal valuable tools including two Youth centres, the European Youth Foundation and human rights campaigns. She suggested that young people are indeed active in political life, but in new ways and therefore their involvement may go unnoticed by those people exercising traditional political power.

The participants explored why young people drop out of traditional democratic processes in their countries. The emphasis was put on the difficult economic and social situations that constrain youth’s willingness and ability to engage actively in civil and political activities. Frustration with existing political institutions was invoked as another important factor.

Asking why spontaneous protests, sometimes with elements of violence, seem to be more attractive to young people than membership in youth organisations or traditional parties, participants noted that very often the same (old) politicians dominate the political scene and occupy public positions and build their networks without leaving any space for newcomers. Young leaders find it difficult, and have no support, to enter politics, or they are pushed to the margins of official political life. Furthermore, young politicians who manage to be elected often have to face stereotypes linked to their youth. The participants concluded that the young generation should prepare to fight to find their proper place in public life.

However, participation of young people should not be measured only by the number of young people elected to official public institutions. The potential of the young generations is released when major changes are taking place, as seen in the Arab Spring and Ukraine’s Maidan Square. Young people can form a very dynamic political force that is the first to act in critical moments and bring about political change. Massive protests are often inspired and managed by courageous students or football fans. However, such involvement and sacrifices risk being lost if there is no long term civic engagement. We should learn from the wasted opportunity of democratic awakening of the young generation in the former Soviet Republics at the beginning of the 1990s.

In some European countries, especially in the post-soviet space, it may be that the lack of engagement in politics is particularly prevalent amongst middle aged people. Here, the old political establishment is still in place and young people are active through different outlets, but the in-between generation is missing from political life.

Politicians often see young generations as the problem, rather than as the solution to build a better future for their countries. Although the young generations are vital for economic and social

development, decision makers still do not give enough importance to youth policy and do not allocate the necessary budgetary resources to this part of society.

It is important to recognise that, in ex-Communist countries, the lack of policies oriented towards young people during the transition period resulted in their disappointment with the state and its institutions, leading to decisions to live abroad. Young people need to be empowered and treated seriously when it comes to democratic decision making processes.

The seminar identified some mechanisms which have been set up in participants' countries to facilitate the involvement of young people in political life, for example public consultation councils. However, it was agreed that civic education should be put in place from childhood in order to ensure the broad and long-term participation of the young generation in public life.

### ***Session 2: Creating opportunities for young people in the labour market***

Mark Neville, Head of the Private Office of the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, highlighted the dramatic youth unemployment rates on the Continent, for example Greece (56,8%), Spain (53,9%) and Croatia (49%). Such situations have led the Human Rights' Commissioner to note that the human rights of youth are at risk due to the economic crisis, austerity measures, and the loss of hope by the young generation in their own country and in politics. Mark Neville asked the meeting if they thought that youth emigration would solve Europe's demographic challenges. How can young people express their economic and social needs, and how can they be better equipped for the labour market? Can entrepreneurship and self-employment be better adapted to address youth unemployment?

In respect of the issue whether youth migration offers a sustainable solution to Europe's demographic challenge, participants recognised that many European countries are currently confronted with an aging population, combined with a shrinking percentage of active people in the labour market. This imbalance creates dangers for the social and welfare systems in these countries. Depending on the country, the challenge to fill specific jobs depends partly on immigration, for example in Norway there is a need for more information specialists than are available 'on the spot'. However, emigration raises many challenges for the country of origin, for example brain drain, whilst at the same time posing problems for the host country if labour immigrants do not find suitable jobs or if they are severely underpaid. This can create tensions as they might be perceived as competitors to workers already based in the country.

Countries with very high youth unemployment rates also need to review their educational policies and structures as they usually are not preparing young people to be able to respond to the needs of the labour market. However, it may also be the case that young people do not have the right attitude towards the labour market. Consequently, there may be a lack of commitment, will and professional interest both from youngsters and employers. To address these weaknesses, employers should consider taking on a proportion of young people without (sufficient) professional experience or with disabilities, whilst at the same time offering structures to teach the skills and values which are lacking. At the same time, young people need to be self-aware and able to adapt to professional requirements; poor social attitudes and inadequate skills and work experience are interrelated barriers preventing the successful entrance of young people into the labour market.

A healthy entrepreneurial climate which encourages young people to start their own business offers an important way to reduce youth unemployment. Although the businesses of young entrepreneurs statistically have a lower survival rate than those of older colleagues they nonetheless have more growth potential. This is all the more true for businesses run by young women. Different business models – *inter alia*, hubs or cooperatives – can stimulate young people to succeed in their business and create new jobs. Support mechanisms, such as a suitable business environment and financial back-up, mentoring and networking, need to be in place to foster young entrepreneurship. However,

in Europe self-employment of young people is relatively low and young people tend to prioritise finding secure jobs in the public sector.

Summing up, there is a need for education policies and the local environment to encourage a shift in this mind-set. It is important for young people to develop their competencies and skills, supported by an effective and adapted educational structure. Governments and politicians need to put in place appropriate policies in order to provide the education, training and accompanying measures required to prepare young people for the labour market.

## **Day 2: “Can young people bring about an agreed set of common values for the future?”**

### ***Session 1: Youth participation in democratic life: a driving force for change?***

Snežana Samardžić-Marković, Director General of Democracy, Council of Europe noted that participation and youth are important concerns for the Council of Europe. She asked what type of participation is expected from young people: do we want them to express their political discontent primarily on the streets? What is the role of social media in this participation? If youth participation in public life is too limited, is this due to a lack of civic awareness or because traditional democracies are too formal, and not aligned with young people’s expectations?

The participants suggested that one problem is that the ideas of upcoming political leaders cannot find their way to be heard. This was illustrated with the example of the British Royal Family; Prince Charles has waited for years his turn, but he may have to pass the job to his son without getting it himself. In a way, something similar is happening to new generations of politicians in European politics, especially in regions where political influence is a legacy within the same group. Changes take place, but very slowly. Young politicians are given an office, internet access and a place beside the leader at the dinner table - but that is all too often where it ends! If young leaders are unable to make their voices heard through the traditional media or to gain access to the government, they will turn towards protest and the social media.

The meeting asked if young people need to take to the streets to bring about change, as illustrated in Ukraine and Tunisia. In Ukraine young people demonstrated in favour of Europe and in reaction to nationalism. Their motto is “if you want it, go for it!”; they embody a new way of doing things and the emergence of civil society. The objective of the young demonstrators in Maidan was to push for further economic and political development, but they were stopped by the older leaders. This leaves young people asking many questions; they had pro-European feelings and they wanted to participate in public life, but in the end they were unable to do so.

Revolutions in North Africa were boosted by people under forty years, yet all the governments that followed were constituted by individuals above forty. The relative inexperience of young people should not be seen as a problem. In Morocco there are four to five political parties where young people play an important role, they have grabbed the power!

In Tunisia only 7.5% of youth participated in the 2011 elections, 5% are active in civil society organisations and 2% are involved in political parties. In the 1980s and 1990s there were many active young leaders, however, the old guard resisted passing on power and they used young politicians as a political tool. Today, hindrances to youth participation include distrust in political institutions and in politicians who are seen as opportunistic self-interested. Obstacles to women’s participation too are widespread, as the social tradition does not allow women to become politically active. Therefore, active people invest in social networking and in demonstrations and young people’s frustration is leading to massive illegal migration and possible death in the Mediterranean. If these frustrations are to be harnessed into political participation, young people need to become

more open and more involved in new political parties. The strength of young people comes from their values and a new vision; any future success will be based on these values.

In Tunisia new laws governing associations mean that the numbers of registered associations has now reached 15 000. However, only 170 of these are devoted to young people. At the same time, however, the new electoral law discriminates young people positively: there has to be a candidate under 40 years old in the top four candidates.

### ***Session 2: Sharing democratic values: youth empowerment through education for democratic citizenship***

Josef HUBER, responsible for Education Practice and Capacity Building in the Council of Europe's Directorate General of Democracy, suggested that although there may be conflict between generations, the fundamental values underlying democracy remain the same. Such values are important as they allow people to build their own environment. Human rights and freedoms are not empty words. There is no conflict between generations on values, but young people have the right to live and experience them differently.

The participants emphasised the central role of education in creating tolerant, democratic societies and in providing citizens with a sense of common values. There is a need for an open dialogue to allow people to rediscover democracy and common values. Values should not be imposed; they cannot be defended by force, but true education may secure and defend them.

Education may give young people an opportunity to overcome their origins. People can learn about democratic values following formal curricula, in schools, but also in an informal way, for example from family, peer groups and media. People learn by taking active part in social life, and they learn quickly, in particular through their own personal experience. Capacity for empathy, solidarity and waking in others' shoes is a part of this. In this way people acquire the skills and attitudes necessary to become a part of a democratic community and to become active participants in its procedures.

Values mean nothing if they are not protected. But often there are problems where values meet with *realpolitik*. Participants noted that a lack of political reaction, in particular by official institutions, including the European ones, may undermine young peoples' belief in those bodies.

A society cannot be democratic if people are not free to speak about values. In times of conflict people may be rapidly indoctrinated by official propaganda and, in this context, having access to reliable information becomes an important issue.

Young people have the right to be critical and should feel free to express their opinions about what is wrong. They have the right to raise their voices against all kind of extremism or against the corruption and injustice of the political systems and classes of their countries. But their voices should also be heard on the state of public affairs and how they are governed, particularly when they see that politicians and state institutions are not able to address properly the challenges.

The upheavals of political and social transformations can be devastating for parts of society. Introducing democratic reforms is sometimes associated with hard times for citizens and poverty and instability. To mitigate this, people should be well-informed about the aims and consequences of policies. Right now there is a need for more solidarity, less inequality and greater social cohesion. There is also a need for good practice examples showing success stories of young people active in public life through participatory democracy.

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## **Brainstorming Round Table on the development of the Schools' Alumni Network**

Jack Hanning, Secretary General of the European Association of Schools of Political Studies, explained the key role this structure plays in helping to build a viable network between Schools, participants, alumni and the Council of Europe. He suggested that underlying the alumni concept is a recognition that alumni can give something back to the institution which has nurtured them. With many of the alumni advancing their careers and having new opportunities open up for them following participation in the Schools' programmes, they are well-placed to contribute to the Schools' activity with experience and expertise in their respective fields, their network of contacts as well as by financial support. The aim of this round table is to identify ways of making alumni involvement international.

During the brainstorming session, participants expressed their interest in and readiness to contribute to the development of an Alumni Network across all Schools of Political Studies and they outlined the potential benefits and challenges to establishing such a network. Participants confirmed the sense of community and of shared values they feel with other alumni in their country and beyond.

The existence of the Council of Europe's political backing and its "stamp of approval" were identified as significant factors in securing support and funding for future activities as it increases the relevance and credibility of the Network.

A number of participants stressed the need to establish clear objectives and define the purpose which the network should serve. To this end, it is important to identify common interests of individuals and Schools within the network. It was pointed out that in order to achieve concrete results, the cooperation should be project-based, particularly in order to feed into fundraising efforts.

Taking into account the broad spectrum of their professional activities, the alumni community constitutes a pool of experts available not only to the Schools but also to the Council of Europe. For this, and in order to map and mobilise activities, the existing alumni database, managed by EASPS, needs to be developed further. Indeed, given the large number of alumni, coordination of activities is crucial to sustainable functioning of the Alumni network and the EASPS could offer the appropriate entity to coordinate this work. The network could function under the auspices of the Association but would be run by the alumni themselves, possibly in the form of a representative board elected from the different Schools in each country.

Individual schools already maintain links with their alumni and engage them in local or national alumni seminars. For instance, the Tbilisi School and its alumni association is now increasingly working on fundraising in thematic, specialised departments. The case of the Moscow School with its large pool of alumni across Russian regions was also mentioned as an example of a community of former participants who can rely on each other's assistance.

The regional dimension was suggested as a possible basis for further international cooperation of the network. Active cooperation in the Western Balkans through the Regional Academy for Democracy was mentioned as an example of a successful regional exchange.

In this context, the alumni's potential to develop civil diplomacy was pointed out. An idea of a space where representatives of countries with unresolved issues could share their views and propose solutions emerged. The participants underlined the importance of communication and dialogue opportunities such meetings can provide. One example of such good practice was facilitating meetings between participants from the Moscow and Tbilisi Schools following the conflict in 2008.

Ad-hoc activities which have been successful in the past and received positive feedback from participants could serve as a basis for launching more systemised activities. The example of the Moscow School carrying out joint programmes with Croatian and Serbian partners was mentioned, as was the launch of the project “Local development for sustainable future in Split” initiated by one generation of participants from the Academy for Political Development (Croatia). An important issue raised during the session was enhancing visibility of the alumni community in order to increase the impact of Schools. Some participants pointed to the little impact onto the society in their respective countries, despite a large number of successful alumni. In order to change this, an SPS Alumni “brand” needs to be promoted, demonstrating the success of many former participants, the ways in which they advance in their careers and how they can make a positive contribution to society.

Efforts should be made by all parties to ensure high interactivity within the network. For this to happen, individual alumni would be expected to become more involved, both in their capacities as multipliers of the Council of Europe values and in building a sustainable and meaningful alumni network. It was proposed to create an on-line forum to keep in touch and exchange ideas and best practices on chosen topics. Several participants suggested establishing a Facebook group to keep in contact following this Alumni meeting. More alumni are encouraged to contribute to the Council of Europe’s Newsletter and to provide content for the Association website, including articles on topics relevant to the Network and news pieces regarding events with alumni participation.

It was also recommended that the network continues to serve as a platform for political analyses as well as a point of information regarding the political situation in different Schools’ countries, again with a more active contribution from alumni.

The participants were highly appreciative of the opportunity this Alumni Seminar presented and expressed their wish for such meetings to take place on an annual basis in Strasbourg or, if feasible, for each edition to be held in a different country. The alumni emphasised the value of personal involvement and welcomed the prospect of more opportunities to meet and discuss various topics relevant across the Network.

### **Concluding remarks by Ambassador Piotr Świtalski, Director of Policy Planning, Council of Europe**

Ambassador Świtalski highlighted the uniqueness of the Schools of Political Studies network as being able to bring together participants from different disciplines, different political backgrounds and different cultures. The wide-ranging and creative discussions held during this seminar reflect this diversity and provide a rare opportunity for a multi-disciplinary, enriching exchange.

Youth are our hope for the future and this meeting has provided many illustrations of the way in which young people are creating dynamic, innovative responses to the challenges facing Europe today. Indeed, one of the most exciting aspects of this meeting has been the enthusiasm with which alumni from different Schools have met and enjoyed getting to know each other. Seeing participants from Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and Moldova sit together and discuss ways they could use social media to keep dialogue open between their countries is an optimistic indication of how this alumni network will grow from strength to strength.

Networking of Schools’ alumni is already active at many different levels – between individuals, within Schools and at local, national and regional levels. This meeting has shown that the way is wide open for the international level.

The Council of Europe invites all Alumni to become its ‘goodwill ambassadors’ and it can be said with good reason that gatherings such as this one will go from strength to strength.