

MICHAŁ BRAUN

Our voice needs to be heard

In an interview with Open Citizenship, the Vice President of the Board of the newly established Polish Youth Council Michał Braun discusses mobility and cooperation between young people from the EU and neighbouring countries. Michał Braun is one of the founders of the Youth Council in Poland and is involved in the Structured Dialogue, which involves consultations with young people and youth organisations at all levels in Member States.

Open Citizenship: As Vice President of the Board of the Polish Youth Council, you were involved in policy development during the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union this year. What role did you play in this process?

Braun: The Polish Council of Youth Organisations is the youngest Youth Council in Europe. The presidency meant big challenges for us. For me, the biggest was the Structured Dialogue. In cooperation with other actors from the National Working Group – the Ministry of Education and the National Agency – we conducted consultations with young people in Poland on the major Presidency topics through the Structured Dialogue. These consultations were very successful because of the large number of participants. The dialogue is a process of contact between young people from all EU countries and decision-makers. Our Presidency topic was cooperation between young people and youth from EU neighbouring countries. As a result of this process the Council passed a resolution on the Eastern Dimension of Youth Mobility.

As a new body we are still developing our policy-making abilities, but we are being asked to comment on some Ministry documents. Taking part in many conferences and meetings on youth issues, from small university discussions to big national conferences, we see that the need for a strong Youth Council is apparent.



What issues were most important during this time? What kind of progress did you see?

The priority of the Polish presidency concerning young people was Eastern mobility. We understand that this is not a crucial topic for all young people in Europe, but it is important to stress that cooperation with neighbouring countries could be a factor for development of youth organisations and for supporting development in our countries.

I see one topic that is vital for the existence of many youth-led NGOs and for non-formal education is the future of the Youth in Action Programme. Throughout the many conferences on the regional, national and international level that we have taking part in, we always stress the importance of support for non-formal education. The presidency gave us the opportunity to meet decision-makers and so we lobbied for an independent youth programme. The Polish government had an official position on keeping the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) and Youth in Action Programme separate – that gave us strong support. The European Commission announced recently that after 2013 the programme will be called ‘Erasmus for All’ and it will mix Erasmus, Youth in Action, Comenius and a few other programmes in one. We are really concerned about that idea.

A mobile person is a flexible one – and mobility is becoming a competence itself nowadays.

What special challenges face young people in the EU? To what extent can they be understood in relation to mobility?

Of course the most important challenge is unemployment. Mobility is not only a key factor for a young person to be available to a higher number of employers but also as a way to get access to better education and training. A mobile person is a flexible one – and mobility is



becoming a competence itself nowadays. Mobility, however, can be much more than being able to change where you live – we could understand it in a broader way, like concerning roles in the society. This might include allowing women to perform jobs traditionally performed only by men.

When I bring up mobility in Europe, what comes to mind?

Open-mindedness. I see that a lot of people use that word, putting it into application forms for universities or training courses. However I also see that it is being misused many times. Open-mindedness is thinking out of the box yourself but also being open to new ideas and other cultures. Not only being tolerant but open. That is what many people in Europe lack and the only way to learn it is by being mobile.

In your opinion, are levels of mobility increasing or decreasing among young Europeans? What trends do you see?

In Poland, I see that the level is increasing a lot. Young people are using the Youth in Action Programme and Erasmus more and more. They are more ready to change their place of living when it is needed to get a better job. They also think about their roles in the society in a different manner.

In its report on the State of Youth Rights in Europe, the European Youth Forum lists several rights, including the right to autonomy, the right to education, the right to civil, political and social participation and the right to mobility. To what extent do you agree with these rights? To what extent are they already guaranteed and how could these rights be strengthened?

These rights are vital for young people and are a condition for them to be equal citizens on every level of democratic life. In most cases they are theoretically guaranteed by law, however in practice, not always. I saw many cases where young people are willing to participate in democratic life but their voices are not heard. I believe that in the first place to use these rights young people need to be granted trust. Too many times we perceived as ones to be fixed – but we have many things to

offer! Thinking of rights of youth, we need to think about the disadvantaged since they need support – but this support very often can be provided by other young people through youth organisations and by youth workers. Governments are spending public money and it is high time to understand that young people are good partners in building modern societies and youth NGOs need to be granted funds for their work.

It is high time to understand that young people are good partners in building modern societies and youth NGOs need to be granted funds for their work.

What made you run for the board of the Polish Youth Council? What would you like to accomplish as vice president?

I am the vice president of the Council in its first year of existence. I was involved a lot in creating this body. After spending over one year working on it, it was natural for me to run for the board. I am very happy that I was elected vice president because I strongly believe that such a Council is needed in Poland.

Our first year has not been an easy time. There is still so much to work out: internal communication, fundraising (now there are no paid personnel) and much more. At the same time, I am coordinating the National Working Group of the Structured Dialogue and that requires a lot of time as well.

What is your outlook for the future of Europe?

I have always been very enthusiastic about the ideals of a united Europe, based in mutual understanding, with countries respecting each other's cultures – 'united in diversity' as it is said in EU documents. That is why I did my master's in European Studies. But of course I see that we have a very long way to go. The current economic situation, unemployment, rising differences between the richest and the poorest etc... questions have been raised that need to be answered in a totally new way. I believe that together we will be able to find answers – but participation of all of citizens, including young people, is crucial. Our voice needs to be heard.