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The project VECU. - What does it mean for seniors to be Europeans? –

My intention for the next half an hour is to present to you the EFOS-Project VECU.

I will explain to you

- Who is involved
- Who has done what
- By which methods
- With which results
- With what insights into the future

The aim of my report is to answer the question:

What does it mean for seniors today to be Europeans?

But there are no questions without preliminary questions:

As you know, we are forgetful at our age and it is always helpful for us to know, where I am just now and who I am. Where we are just now and who we are?

As you know: We are in Wroclaw. This is a famous city of dramatic art. Here the avantgardists of theatre Henryk Tomaszewski and Jerzy Grotowski worked.

This is a City of science. An incredible ten Nobel prize-winners have lived and done research here.

And it is a city of romanticism. August Kopisch was born here in 1799, the discoverer of the grotto azurro of Capri and Joseph Eichendorff, the poet of the blue flower:

Ich suche die blaue Blume
Ich suche und finde sie nie
Mir träumt, dass in der Blume
Mein gutes Glück mir blüh.

And this European capital of modern theatre, science and romanticism was quite a suitable place to start our project VECU and with this meeting to finish it.

And my second preliminary question: who we are?

The answer to this question shall guide us into the centre of our project.

We are seniors, students, members of EFOS and Europeans.

To be senior means today to have been born between 1925 and 1955.

These generations grew up with the dark background of World-War II.

Being a citizen of a state which was perpetrator or victim of political crimes was inscribed into the consciousness of our childhood.

We all know through our own or our friends' experiences what it means to lose father or mother, brothers and sisters to violence.

Many of us know what it means to be hungry and to have nothing to eat, to feel cold and to be without protection.

We know the deep division between Eastern and Western Europe, which split our continent into two inimical ideological systems, armed to the teeth for nearly fifty years.

We didn't know how one really lives on the other side of the frontier.

We got to know how the fascist and communist ideologies distort the perceptions of the others.

But these generations are also witness to the wonder of how human beings are able to transgress such a bloody border by courage, wisdom and solidarity.

To be a member of our generations means to know the highs and lows of European history.

But it is also typical for these generations to be in a post-professional state without defined functions and public roles.

The role of the third generation is new in the demographic evolution of our European societies.

The seniors of this generation look for tasks which give their existence a meaning, which provide them with personal satisfaction and the society with a public benefit, which they no longer have.

We are senior-students. That means we can freely follow our interests in our studies without any external compulsions. It is not our professional life, nor our careers, nor financial necessity that motivates us to study, but only the aim of gaining knowledge of our personal interest and orientation in the worlds of philosophy, science, literature and also in our political and social life.

We look primarily for meaning, not for profit.

Whatever we study: physics, astronomy, biology, languages or philosophy, our interest is “to perceive what holds the world together in its innermost folds,” “was die Welt im Innersten zusammenhält”.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

We want to be good partners in our talks with the young; we want to be good companions for the generations of our children and grandchildren. We share the wish to be good supporters of our societies and the feeling of responsibility for it.

We are members of EFOS. What does this mean?

We are senior-students of 9 European countries. We have a great interest in the sources of the cultural richness of Europe and we feel the deep wish to know what happens in the other regions of Europe, what themes, what questions the others are occupied with.

What they think about the themes we are occupied with.

We are a union of elderly Europeans who look for study-friends in other countries, who can give us an idea of the values of their culture.

Twice a year we come together for an exchange of our experiences.

Through the EFOS I have gained friends in Sweden and Poland, in the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, in Slovakia and Austria and naturally in Germany, too.

It is wonderful to discover what pleasure it brings to speak with friends about the books they read, the customs they like and the proverbs they use.

And on this platform of the EFOS we can discuss the public role of elderly students within the universities as well as in our societies.

And we are Europeans. That means we are members of our different countries, we are speakers of our different native languages and we have the same common heritage of ancient thinkers, Christian Church Fathers, the philosophers of the Enlightenment, of our European artists Bach, Mozart, Chopin and Dvorak, Roger van der Weyden and van Gogh, and the great humanitarian tradition of Henri Dunant and Mother Teresa.

The long centuries of European conviviality have lead us to the common values of personal liberty, common solidarity, Christian charity, humanity and the principles of the constitutional state.

I wish to express the values of Europe with the words the Polish Premier Donald Tusk used in Aachen last May: He said:

“I wondered many a time how it happened that the Nazis and Communists did not manage to disinherit us from Europe. It would seem that we had so little for our defence: ruined cemeteries, the shadow of the huge Gothic church, the pealing of bells in the town hall tower... We also had something that someone beautifully called: the modest dignity of custom. In my case, these were the Sunday outings with my parents to the sweetshop, undertaken against the drabness and poverty of everyday life.

In my family, this was also the joint music-making accompanying the holidays which – as I later learnt – used to be practised (and is perhaps practised to this day) in Trieste, Munich, and Utrecht.

Such a Europe was there in us, or at the least the faithfulness to the dream about Europe was there in us. Possibly Ortega y Gasset is right to write that the uniqueness of Europe hinges on the profound sense of historicity thanks to which it has organic continuity and identity. Thanks to being a community of cooperation and conflicts, exchange and custom, and not a product of ideologies, it can defy the very ideologies, even those that – like Nazism and communism – grew from the European spirit, yet eventually were not capable of corrupting it.

Nevertheless, such ideologies had to make their mark on European identity. This may concern especially those expanses of the continent that for various historical and geographic reasons are of a borderland character. Beyond any doubt, communism reinforced here a certain type of mixed feelings: in Europe we feel at the same time like natives and foreigners, to refer to the Polish Nobel Prize winner, Czesław Miłosz.

Yet may it be so that Europe needs such Europeans for whom it is at the same time the homeland and a foreign country; something of one's own and something alien. Possibly, it is from such relations and tensions that an increasingly better and increasingly more human community grows."

That was the spirit, - expressed with the words of this year's Polish award-winner of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen, - in which we designed our project VECU here in Wrocław two years ago.

The design of our project

It is a multifaceted European project. We didn't want only an exchange of experiences among the members of EFOS, nor only a conversation between seniors, but we wanted to do something together.

Our common project should fulfill different conditions: It should be meaningful for the participating seniors and bring them a personal benefit.

It should support their studies. It should strengthen the cohesion of EFOS.

It should strengthen the understanding between the regional European cultures.

It should be useful for the younger generations.

So we had the idea to create a virtual centre of regional European cultures. We wanted to initiate an intercultural dialogue between the regional European cultures about the themes which seemed to us important for Europe and the coming generations.

In this field three dimensions seemed important to us:

At first: we wanted to take a look – in the words of Donald Tusk - at the "modest dignity of custom". How do you eat in Poland or Slovakia, how do you celebrate your festivals, what do you sing in the families, how do you live together in your houses, what customs do you have?

Put concisely: we wanted to know how you live the every-day life here and there. That was the real dimension of our project.

Beside that, the imaginative world of literature and poetry seemed important to us: What are your authors dreaming of and what do you dream of while reading them? What writers do you read with what themes?

And at last we considered the world of public philosophy, which is expressed in the proverbs of our countries. How do you express a common insight with the fewest words?

And the third dimension was the world of music tradition: How do you express your feelings through music, how do the elderly do it? How do the young do it?

Thus we emphasized:

- What every study-group would like to transmit as cultural possessions to the younger generations,
- In which way the transmission should proceed,
- And whether the task of culture-transmission should be considered a public task of the elder generations in our societies.

Our procedure

In order to give our intercultural dialog a clear form, we set up tandems and triples between our local study-groups.

The study-groups, bound to a university of the third age, constituted the basis of our project. They were the places where the decisions were made about a field of themes.

The tandems and triples constituted our intercultural meeting places. They were the places of giving and receiving.

As a place of coordination for the whole project we used the meetings of EFOS. From there we got the initial idea. From there the tandems were coordinated and guided. Here we put together our results today.

Our method of learning partnership was relatively simple: Every local study-group was to decide what cultural possession it wanted to transmit to the younger generations. It was to travel to the tandem-partners and present to them what it regarded as worth transmitting to the younger generations. In a second step it was to receive the tandem-partners in its own country and let them present their cultural possessions to it. In a third step both groups were to prepare their contributions for publication on the common project website. The journeys of the tandem-partners were supported generously by the EU-Grundtvig programme Learning-partnerships.

So our project demanded of us at first an exchange and an agreement within the local study-group about what seemed to be worth transmitting to the younger generations. Next, it required each group to find a partner-group with similar thematic interests under the EFOS-members and to make an intercultural exchange with them about these common themes and thirdly it was necessary to find a group of younger people eager to gain knowledge or experience of these customs.

Our results

Our results are as broadly diversified as our whole project. At first our concrete results:

Two groups dealt with everyday-culture and essential parts of their popular culture.

The Tandem Bratislava-Wroclaw dealt with eating and with bread-culture, with events in human life like baptism and funeral rites and yearly festivities like Christmas and Easter, with greetings in everyday-life, with the customs in connection with viniculture and sheep-farming.

These themes were connected with the culture of music and popular songs.

A little group tried to discover the musical interests of pupils and students by interviews, which they evaluated.

The Triple Brno, Dresden and Kiel concentrated on housing culture.

Within this field the study-group of Brno emphasized the architecture and the styles of reform, the group in Dresden the culture of conviviality and the technical side of housing and the group in Kiel the customs and traditions which surround the housing.

Two other intercultural groups dealt with literature and popular philosophy.

The Triple Groningen, Magdeburg and Vienna chose the culture of reading as its subject.

At first every study-group had to propose five books and they had long discussions within the local groups which books seemed suitable to all of them. Finally there were fifteen books on the common triple-table which each participant was to read. Out of this number they chose five books which they interpreted thoroughly. The discussions focused on the typical values expressed in the books but also on the selection of books.

The forth intercultural group was *the Triple Bratislava, Vienna, Wroclaw*. They collected proverbs of their native language and compared them among the triple, deciding which were common and which

unique to their languages. Proverbs are the atoms of universal cognition, a condensate of popular philosophy. Erasmus of Rotterdam called them Adagia which means instructions for acting. Nietzsche called them “Sprühteufelchen”. The evidence that so many proverbs of the European languages have the same meaning is a true indicator of the correspondence among the regional cultures of Europe. Erasmus’s collection of proverbs reached 27 editions during his lifetime. We can be curious how many editions we will reach.

All these results you can find on our website. This website is a special work. It represents our virtual centre of European cultures, which has given our project the acronym VECU. It is pleasing to use and you can wander through it as through a new museum. For us it is the place for publishing our findings. We understand this website as a collection of examples which invite you all to accompany us and to enlarge our collection.

Our insights

Because of the broad scope of our themes and our diverse cooperation we learned many things about our own regional culture, about the others and about the younger generations. Let me explain our insights - to you with nine remarks.

1st remark: **Seniors are highly interested** in getting to know and to understand better the culture in which they live. It is no big problem to persuade older people to occupy themselves with their culture and the transmission of it. But it is difficult to establish study-groups. Elderly persons tend to isolate themselves to a certain degree, and that is unproductive. Study-groups of elderly people need institutions with permanent contact-persons and competent moderators. Elderly persons still make too little use of the new media of communication.

Nor is it a big problem to bring about an intercultural dialogue. There is a double astonishment how much of one’s own can be discovered in that of the others, how fascinating the differences are, and how much better one can understand one’s own culture when one knows the culture of the others.

The exchange with the younger generations was more difficult to establish because there are few groups of younger people which have a common interest with the elderly. It was easiest for those groups that had contact with schools or teachers, with a university-chair or institutions of education. One study-group, Dresden, has built a really broad spectrum of educational institutions. However, the experiences of our groups show that those in the younger stages of life are more approachable than the older ones, and that only after puberty do the interests grow once more.

2nd remark: Of these three interests: the cultural, the intercultural and the intergenerational **the cultural interest has absolute priority for seniors**. Which means: without cultural interest you can not have an intercultural exchange. And without the consciousness of your own cultural values you are not interested in transmitting your culture to the young. It is impossible to support the intercultural or intergenerational dialogue, if you do not provide enough time for the local study-groups to come to an agreement on their own cultural interest.

Nevertheless, the strongest impulse and motivation of our project came from the intercultural tandems and triples. Only the task of presenting their own culture to seniors of another European region awakened their consciousness of their own cultural values.

It was noticeable that after the impetus of EFOS, all study-groups began their project-work by discovering their own cultural interest. No group began with questioning the young: what’s your interest, what do you wish to get to know from us. The result was that in all groups the interests were much more intercultural than intergenerational.

3rd remark: Such a project works best if it is supported by **pre-existing study-groups**. If the study-group must still be established much time is lost by seeking suitable persons. For example: In Bratislava there is a university-chair for folklore with study-groups of seniors. They were able to

produce many results very quickly. For the literature- and the proverb-group it was much more difficult to establish a new study-group.

None of the participating groups had had connections to a group of younger people before the beginning of our project.

Only the group of Dresden seems to have a continuous contact to youth-groups.

4th remark: **The personal contacts** and the visits to the partners in the other country are of high importance, because the participants found mutual acknowledgement and confidence.

Emails and attachments are helpful, but only when the partners know one another.

5th remark: **The language-problem** plays an important role in the intercultural exchange. The native language supports a regional communication-community, but establishes also a border to the other communication communities.

It supports the developing of cultural properties, but at the same time forms barriers which hinder the intercultural dialogue and need to be surmounted.

Europe thrives on the richness of its regions and languages. Therefore, efforts to learn the language of the others are necessary for the intercultural exchange. In our project it was very helpful for the Tandems to have a language of discussion. Generally, the effort to learn the foreign language needs additional support, but brings also an additional enrichment.

Translators are helpful, but need time and they can never substitute for one's own understanding. The ideal could be to learn the language of one neighbor country and a world language.

6th remark: Seniors can only be motivated for projects which promise a personal advantage for them. Therefore it is difficult to speak about literature with seniors who seldom read literature.

And therefore it is also difficult to persuade seniors to participate who prefer the short proverbs to reading thick novels. One discourages seniors living in regions with manifold folklore they like, if they get no chance to speak about it.

The strength of seniors consists in their special knowledge, experiences and interests. A group of seniors is a collection of special talents. It is useless to operate with general norms or standards. The key to a project with elderly persons is the connections and combinations of their particular special abilities. That applies also to regional groups of seniors, because they belong to different groups of varied common experiences. Regional cultures are special cultures, too. Generalizations are useless. In this field nothing is governed by the principle of necessity.

7th remark: Projects with seniors should not be overloaded with tasks. The majority of our participants would have been content with the intercultural exchange.

Some seniors gave up when they realized that an intergenerational exchange was part of the project. They felt overwhelmed by this. They saw a problem in appropriating the values of their culture and transmitting them to the younger ones in the context of the same project.

The communication within one's own generation has its own value and to many seniors it is of great importance and needs much time.

Our project would have won weight and importance if we could have given more room for the intercultural exchange. But the rules of Grundtvig prevent this. This does not mean that older students always like to separate themselves. Just the opposite is correct. Many of them were happy about the questions and suggestions coming from the younger generations. But it would have been easier, if the intergenerational exchange had been a separate project.

8th remark: An intergenerational exchange should not have the form of a school-lesson, but follow the principle of supply and demand. It worked well where the knowledge of the seniors met with interest from the young.

Culture works through attractiveness, not obligations or force.

It needs to be playful. This also applies to the exchange between generations.

9th My last remark: For such a project competent moderators are absolutely necessary. All our groups were guided by moderators who held on to the central thread. They took care of the methodic continuity and anchoring.

The competence of moderation is an ability of its own, and not all seniors have it, but it can be acquired.

Therefore, adequate opportunities for acquiring such skills should be part of the programme of senior-universities.

They facilitate the working of the groups. They support their productivity.

What does it mean for senior-students to be European? That is my last question.

It means first to live and to cultivate our native culture, our own literary dreams, our philosophy, but always to be open to giving and taking with the others.

And it means to understand the diversity of European cultures, dreams and philosophies as a strong spring of inspiration for all of us.

It means to look for the encounter with others, to want the dialogue with them and to deliver their richness to the young, if they need and wish it.

Let us establish many Tandems and Triples. They are the workshops of the cultural dialogue between us Europeans. We are free to do so.

Let us study our common and our special heritage.

The experience of our post-war-generation says: We need many such workshops.

The experience of the senior-students of EFOS and our project says:

This is possible and the senior-universities are the true places for those workshops.

My last word is a word of thanks,

first to the six groups, whose energy and wit supported the project,

then to Peter Hug, the director of our virtual Museum of European Culture and the master of our website,

then to the board of EFOS, who promoted our project so intensely,

and to the University of the Third Age of Wroclaw, where we planted the blue flower of our project and where we want it to flourish.