

TRANSLATING EUROPEAN VALUES INTO PRACTICE

POSITION PAPER

VALUES ARE INVISIBLE LIKE THE WIND.
YOU KNOW THERE IS WIND FROM THE
FLUTTERING OF LEAVES, AND YOU
REALIZE VALUES EXIST THANKS TO
THE ACTIONS OF PEOPLE. ÉVA ANCSÉL

WHY TEVIP?

The project TEVIP aims at promoting an open and peaceful European society. Differently from other approaches, TEVIP focuses its attention on the values that regulate the behaviour of each individual and of the community. The partnership, which involves German, Polish and Italian organizations, and a European network, considers it essential to investigate this particular aspect, which has not yet emerged broadly in the political debate and in educational activities for young people.

The project considers learning about and debating on values, and in particular on European values¹ to be a key feature for understanding complex, and sometimes conflicting, realities both on the European and the local level.

Debating on values can lead to an authentic listening to each other's points of view, to dialogue and mutual understanding, and to developing critical thinking. Therefore, it can create a society in which diversity becomes the "glue" for a community and not an element causing polarization and conflicts.

¹ THE TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION, article 2, "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail".

Values, in our opinion, constitute an important tool for the construction of a more equitable and peaceful society that is respectful of human rights and of dignity.



WHY A POSITION PAPER?

This document aims at spreading the main reflections that have emerged in the context of the project, so that local and European decision makers, activists, educators, teachers and trainers will be able, from these brief pages, to draw inspiration for further considerations both at a political and at a socio-educational level. We hope to contribute to understanding the role that values play in society and in everyone's lives.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT: THE COMPLEXITY OF CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

Contemporary Europe shows a very complex reality, very difficult to read both for young people as well as for adults. There are many "challenging situations" that often catch our attention and leave us with a bitter vision of the present and little hope for the future. However, alongside these fractures, there are new scenarios and paradigms that give back confidence and serenity. TEVIP considers important not to neglect the above two sides, by analysing the complexity without being overwhelmed by a partial, distorted and altered vision of the facts.

We believe that, nowadays, there is the tendency of mostly focusing on the weaknesses, the problems and the dangers in Europe, depicting a fragmented and partial reality.

Instead, TEVIP has the objective of contributing in favour of a positive, multifaceted and complex reality, based on values. We believe that having a positive approach to contemporary reality is not a way to hiding problems but the first real step to dealing with them.

Below there are the most salient aspects that inspired us to promote a specific project, TEVIP, on values and on European values.

- We know that the rise of Eurosceptic, anti-democratic and populist parties and movements is a risk both to the trust of citizens in the European project, and to the maintaining of liberal and democratic systems. However, if we look beyond fractures and dig into complexity, we can see several movements, associations and individuals (and not just "protestors") that still believe in and fight for democracy and European integration. These people promote credible political answers both at the local, national and European level. The student movements and the civil society are among the many examples of this "part of the world" that is often not very visible, but that we believe to be crucial in this debate.
- We feel a strong culture and a rhetoric of fear - the fear of the unknown, the fear of the other, the fear of the future - within the society, which contributes to creating a growing sense of precariousness and anxiety. This fear is often a product of and a response to the current era characterized by rapid changes. On the other hand, fear is also exploited by politicians, parties and movements in



order to manipulate public opinion. Alongside this, however, there are a number of contexts in which people choose to respond to fear through a culture of encounter, closeness, dialogue and acceptance. For example, young people involved in volunteering, youth workers and educators work every day at school and outside school to fight for the right to study for those from difficult social and economic backgrounds. Moreover, the various campaigns carried out by individuals and groups to create awareness about this issue are a good example of this.

- We think that often, political decisions are driven by a loud minority that has manipulated the popular democratic discourse with an authoritarian rhetoric of exclusion and aggressive ideologies; this has indirectly promoted an increase in cases of extremism and violence. Despite this, there is a “silent majority” of people who decide not to pursue a culture of violence and who daily, in their families, at the workplace and in peer groups, act in a non-humiliating and edifying way. There are also many campaigns worldwide against all forms of violence (psychological, physical or verbal), even online, that have been carried out in recent years and that have seen the involvement of thousands of activists and supporters. TEVIP wants to give voice to this silent majority and to provide young people with a space and an environment in which they can develop their democratic competencies.

Our partnership aims at considering the different aspects of our societies, in their complexity and different nuances, rather than fostering the polarization of point of views. Regarding the complexity of contemporary reality, in which opposing and antithetical phenomena coexist, TEVIP wants to emphasize the importance of openness and dialogue. According to the partnership, retreating behind one's own point of view and positions, be they right or wrong, would be useless and would perpetuate closures, crystallize differences, polarize opinions and movements that are theoretically fighting for the same values. Only an approach based on openness, on authentic listening to each other's points of view, can foster dialogue and therefore a mutual understanding, leading to the development of critical thinking and to a society in which diversity becomes a community “glue” and not an element of polarization and conflict.

WHY WORKING ON EUROPEAN VALUES TODAY —TEVIP AND YOUNG PEOPLE POSITIONS AND POINTS OF VIEWS

Being aware of the trends and fractures of contemporary Europe described above, TEVIP considers it essential to pursue an open and shared reflection on values.

Acting according to values means being aware of the principles to be followed and respected, and it means knowing the limits that must not be overstepped in order to avoid trampling on the rights, the values and freedom of others. Acting according to values means creating relationships and ties instead of differences and divisions. Moreover, acting according to values means being a society.

This idea is confirmed by TEVIP surveys conducted in the first months of the project. Young people have, in fact, stressed the importance of working on values in order to prevent conflicts, promote mutual respect and acceptance and reinforce the European identity.

While we believe that it is important to work on values, we also see that our societies are having to deal with a kind of value disorientation. Sometimes, European values are not deeply understood, sometimes they are taken for granted. In addition, European values are frequently subject to a tendentious re-construction through an altered or partial presentation of data, news and contents. People in power use values in order to influence goals, interests and/or moral orientation of the population, or of a part of it. Values can be distorted, read through different lenses, and interpreted with contradictory and partial meaning.

So, if on the one hand there is a lack of knowledge of European history and its moral and ethical foundations, on the other hand we find the following three trends useful in order to read and analyse the issue of European values:

- **Problems related to the definition of meanings.** Without a common ground of shared meanings, social misunderstandings easily arise. Do values have the same meaning for all people, or do they acquire different meanings?
- **Problems related to action.** There is sometimes an inconsistency between principles and conduct. Even where meaning is shared, behaviour may be in contrast with the principles. Can there really be a dichotomy between principles and conduct?
- **Problems related to manipulation.** Frequently we see a tendentious elaboration of the European values that are invoked and exploited to validate the action that harms the values themselves.

CURRENT CHALLENGES FOR EDUCATORS, YOUTH WORKERS, TEACHERS AND TRAINERS

In this historical moment of epoch-making change, the situations in which we live pose new challenges that are sometimes difficult to understand. TEVIP has identified the following challenges for young people and for those who work actively with young people (youth workers, teachers, trainers) as priorities:

Challenges for young people

- Getting to the roots of issues and developing critical thinking.
- Living relationships and emotions, which would allow us to overcome many divisions, to reduce fear, and to meet diversity in a spirit of curiosity.
- Identifying reliable sources of information in the multitude of inputs that the media offer to us.
- Cultivating values as a tool to investigation, in order to understand each other in a multicultural society.

- Conceive instability, precariousness, the unknown and the unusual as an opportunity and not as a limit.

Challenges for educators, youth workers, teachers and trainers

- Reaching out to young people and motivating them, finding common ground for relationships.
- Overcoming mistrust regarding change.
- Cultivating values, understood as a tool for making choices and taking decisions.
- Being able to refer to current events in a critical and clear way.

HOW TO TRANSLATE EUROPEAN VALUES INTO PRACTICE —TEVIP PROPOSALS

How to overcome these challenges? How to respond to the complexity of contemporary society?

The main TEVIP proposals are the following:

1) **Building a narrative that connects us as Europeans in a dialogical way.**

This narrative cannot be based on a shared language, on historical events, cultural characteristics, or religious identity, as these are subject to different interpretations. However, the fact that we all share values and want to open ourselves to dialogue can become the starting point from which to promote our European identity which will not replace but complement the other multiple identities of each of us.

2) **Overcoming an exclusive interpretation of European values.** The fact that all EU Member States share these values and that the EU refers to shared values gives the different stakeholders a European dimension. However, these values must not have an exclusive trait (defining who is outside and who is inside), but inclusive.

3) **Building an open debate and a learning space.** We must accept that there are different ways of interpreting and putting European values into practice. Starting from a shared and basic idea of values, we must open up our mind, engage ourselves in respecting others' points of view, and have the desire to create a common ground as a source of growth and learning.

4) **Supporting the development of critical thinking, in the context of formal and non-formal education, which must not only consider the contents but rather aim at the acquisition of key competences of citizenship.** The latter are essential for living in a complex and multicultural society and for assuring a free development of one's identity.

5) **Using interactive methods that promote an open debate and are an appropriate means to raise awareness about the topic and to develop empathy for the other side.**

On the basis of these five proposals, TEVIP's concrete contribution to responding to the complexity of contemporary reality and to building a peaceful and inclusive society is to promote new methods and new educational tools based on values.

The tools designed and promoted in the context of the project are educational activities tested with young people and adults and then collected in a manual. The manual aims at providing both inspiration to those who work in the youth sector and practical tools to all those involved in educational processes with young people.

These new tools allow to:

- respond to complexity through dialogue.
- facilitate a meeting instead of polarizing opinions.
- create inclusive narratives.

Thanks to these new tools and materials, TEVIP aims to build an environment of mutual respect, mutual honesty and authenticity: an environment in which differences are perceived constructively and explored through the lens of values that characterize our being and our actions. As a matter of fact, it is only thanks to values that it is possible to develop critical thinking, to open spaces for dialogue and to allow different people to listen to each other even starting from very distant positions. Values are the basic factors that motivate our actions. If we want to aim for positive changes within our communities, we must first understand the language of change. That language is represented exactly by the values we share as tools for understanding each other.