

Young Austrians Discuss the Changing European Landscape

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Vienna, Austria -- "Walls or Bridges? Populism, Integration and the Future of Europe" was the title of a panel discussion organized by the Youth Committee of UPF-Austria.

The event, which was held on May 22, 2017, at the University of Vienna, was the second of a series of discussions on this topic. The first one took place in December 2016.

The four speakers addressed the topic from different angles:

Mr. David Meinel of the European Students' Forum spoke about populism. He explained that there is not only political populism but also ecological and cultural populism. In politics we can observe both right-wing and left-wing populism. In essence, populism mainly appeals to the emotions.

Mr. Meinel explained about the roots of populism in the 16th century, when governments became more centralized. He observed that today's party system is outdated and unable to change. He suggested aiming for direct democracy, similar to how it is practiced in Switzerland or in ancient Greece, i.e., "a world of doing and acting."

The second speaker was Professor Ismael Yasin, a former professor at Damascus University in Syria who has lived in Vienna for two years. He was able to learn German and to adapt to the new situation, so that he could find work at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. From there he moved to the Austrian Integration Fund, working on a project called Meeting Point Austria, which helps Syrian and other refugees find their place in their new country. "Knowledge is power and light, while ignorance is darkness," Professor Yasin stated. "We need to know each other. We belong to different religions and ethnicities. But we all have one origin."

He explained briefly about Syrian culture, which goes back 9,000 years. The three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), which started there and have the same heritage, have to find a way to work together, he said.

His next topic was his work with Syrian refugees in Vienna. Although learning the language is essential, cultural integration is most important, he said. That's why he used to take refugees to historic sites in Vienna, explaining Austrian history and culture. He got very good responses to these programs.

The audience could sense the great effort he has been making in helping refugees find their place in Austria.

Nina Tsiklauri, whose background is Georgian, gave a presentation on the project Pulse of Europe (pulseofeuropa.eu/), a citizens' initiative for reshaping the European Union. Every Sunday afternoon a group of volunteers meet at a public place, with everyone having an opportunity to present his/her ideas for the EU. The action group was founded in Frankfurt, Germany, by a couple who wanted to create a platform for the exchange of ideas.

In Vienna the team consists of 10 persons, and their expenses are covered by crowdfunding.

The motivation and the vision of this action group are to spread a pro-European atmosphere and a positive image about the EU. They are also setting an example of active citizenship, which should help ensure the freedom that Europe has been enjoying for several decades. Finally, people have to be more informed about the European Union, Ms. Tsiklauri said.

Aladin Naksh Bandi, from Syria, gave a presentation on Smart Academy (www.smartacademy.de/index.php/en/home-en), a project that he founded in 2014, through which refugees receive tutoring and seminars in various fields, such as learning German, legal advice and job opportunities. The aim of this project is to promote tolerance, understanding and goal-oriented thinking.

Mr. Bandi explained: "Seeing the situation of the refugees in Vienna, I asked myself: How can I contribute to building bridges between cultures? I concluded: We have to become smart people by being able to contribute something good to society. A person's performance has to be measured by a KPI [key performance indicator] system!"

Mr. Bandi stated: "If you perform well in your job and in social relationships, this is your treasure! Life is short, so let's live smart!"

At the conclusion of the presentations a discussion was initiated, which was chaired by the moderator, Ms. Vojna Ngjeari.

As all four speakers emphasized an active approach to solving the initial problems that refugees face in their new environment, a spirit of mutual support and inspiration carried the evening. Among the nearly 70 participants there were many University of Vienna students from various cultural backgrounds, who were using the opportunity to learn and develop in a country other than their own.



**A reflection written by one of the speakers,
Aladin Naksh Bandi:
Bridges of Peace Rather than Walls of Hatred!**

I have attended a remarkable number of conferences and events, but nothing was like my panel discussion yesterday at the University of Vienna, which was organized by the Universal Peace Federation. The important panel was organized by a group of active young people who represent the hope of our prosperous future. Joanna P. was very impressive with her eye for details. Moreover, the imprints of [UPF-Austria Secretary General] Peter Haider were clear in leading the Youth Ambassadors for Peace toward a culture of peace and tolerance, something that we need badly nowadays.

I was never convinced like today about the urgent need for collaboration among institutions, as clearly stated in the 17th goal on the list of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially in light of the bloody and terrorist attacks that took place in Manchester [United Kingdom] today, only a couple of hours after our conference of peace. Though all 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals are important, Goal Number 16 is what we need badly, i.e., peace, justice and strong institutions, without which the other SDGs have no meaning. We should stand up, join hands -- regardless of religion, color or race -- and build bridges of humanity against walls of terror and war.

That was the main topic of our panel discussion yesterday. I hope that the points raised in our discussion will turn into action plans and collaboration among all civil society institutions, ensuring that bridges of understanding, respect, solidarity and tolerance are built on solid foundations.