

2016/17 Academic Year

ZOCHONIS SPECIAL ENTERPRISE AWARD FUND - Travel Report

University of Manchester

# Attitudes towards life experiences and future prospects amongst young people in Western and Central Europe

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*Among Youth (Czech Republic). AlyonaOrlova - Flickr*

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## An Insight

Thanks to an award from the Zochonis Special Enterprise Fund I was able to conduct a research project on how young people across Central Europe perceive their life chances and view political and economic institutions respective to this. By interviewing young people, both strangers and acquaintances, from various nations across the continent I was able to grasp and understand what members of my generation possibly collectively perceive to be their main concerns and worries as Europe is currently in a state of political, economic and demographic flux. I travelled for a month in total utilising the European railway network and visited the urban centres and ruralities of the Central European nations that are the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Czech Republic and Italy (in that order).

The motivation for the project is due to my personal experiences of precarious work and unemployment growing up in Warrington, a large post-industrial town on the River Mersey between Liverpool and Manchester. Throughout my youth I have gone through a carousel of contrasting attitudes, blaming my circumstances and my sometimes fragile feeling of belonging and meaning on recently arrived migrant workers, psychopathic banks that caused the global recession, successive national governments that adhered to neoliberal doctrine and even the European Union, an institution that in my belief endorsed all of the above.

Through conversing and sharing experiences with people from across the continent, I found a hybridity of differing attitudes and what young people perceive to be priorities in their lives. Young people adapt according to their current

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environment and situation, a product of us growing up in late modernity and within the information age, fluid meaning we seem to be not rooted to one particular place or life-time vocation.

## **A Social Pilgrimage - What I Discovered.**

My journey began in the great city of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, fittingly considered to be the gateway of continental Europe which is home to one of the largest ports in the world. The city is home to a large mix of immigrants, new and old and Rotterdam notably has a young demographic - nearly a third of its citizens are under the age of 27. According to a group of youths in the Noord neighbourhood of the city, this shift in demographic makeup has gone alongside a huge change in Rotterdam, from an industrial port that knew its place in the world to one that is now competing with other ports in Europe to host the biggest container ships and thus the best trade deals. Rotterdam's horizon is made up of skyscrapers that are home to most of the world's largest multinational corporations. From this group I specifically interviewed Manuel, a Dutch man in his early 30's from a small town in the the North of the country who moved to Rotterdam in search of high paid, secure work. He hopes to enter education in the near future to acquire qualifications in the hope of securing steady employment in the Hotel industry. He expressed that our generation's biggest challenge is the 'throwaway culture' that he feels we abide by and that it is not sustainable both ecologically and economically. He passionately expressed that he believes our obsession with dispensable consumer goods is almost religious and reflects the condition of the current world economy. We had this conversation as container ships from China were unloading such goods less than three miles from where we

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stood. Manuel's journey to a major city in search for work and the need to achieve academic accreditation to work within a industry renowned for precarious work is reflective of a Europe-wide experience of employment in the 21st Century.

The next leg of my journey took me to the village of Suchov, just a few miles from the Slovakian border in the rural South Moravia district of Czech Republic, which feels almost a world away from the cosmopolitan capital Prague. I stayed with the family of an acquaintance called Marian who is the same age as me, whom I met when I was 20 in my hometown of Warrington. Marian had come to Warrington in search of paid work in one of the many industrial parks that were built in the town during the late 1980's and 1990's next to the three major motorways crisscrossing the town, in the knowledge that if he brought his pay back to the Czech Republic, when converted into Czech koruna it would be worth three times as much. He proved this point by comparing how much it costs to buy a pint of beer in both of the countries. What better way.



The Rolling Hills of South Moravia





An example of the many burgeoning industrial parks around Warrington that attract workers from across the EU in search of higher paid labour. Similar to the one Marian worked at. The site was previously a US Airbase until the end of the Cold War.

The Czech Republic upon visiting was suffering from a prolonged drought, this was the talk of the village, superstitions were being sought as an answer to the cause of the drought. The older villagers had lost faith in meteorological explanations for it. At that point in July it had not rained for over three weeks according to Marian, with vegetation, crops and even rivers suffering from the lack of precipitation. This took the forefront of young people's concerns in and around Suchov upon speaking to them, it being linked to a wider one that climate change is affecting the ecology of the area and a problem that their generation has inherited. The concerns are that great that young locals believe that securing the future prosperity of their community is more important than working in another country for higher wages.

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Marian believes to achieve this it is necessary to revive some of the ideals of the socialism that their parents, the village and the nation adhered to, moving away from he feels, the current neo-liberal model of capitalism that has pays no interest to localities such as Suchov and a return to a simpler way of living that ensured resources used stayed in the area and were distributed accordingly. Marian believes that a Czech style of ecological democratic socialism is what is required to ensure a healthy future for his locality. He reiterated this point by stating that some of the forests around his parents house had been bought by a Dutch logging company who will be extracting the resources and profits and leaving his children and grandchildren to deal with the harm to the local environment. He said this as he pointed to a river that ran by the side of his house that he played in as a child that has dried up due to the prolonged drought in the country.

I left the Czech Republic and traveled to Hamburg, during the long weekend that the G20 Summit took place in early July of this year. The city was on lockdown as expected, as the world's leaders converged to discuss current global political and economic policy. The intention of my visit to the city was to speak to those that had made the pilgrimage across the country and continent to find out how they felt about their life chances in a globalised world. The majority of demonstrators that were protesting what the summit symbolised were young, confused and unsettled by the current economic conditions that they claim dictate their lives with no other alternative considered.



Scenes turned ugly in Hamburg on the Friday and Saturday nights of the G20 Summit. Anarchists and anti-capitalists young and old fought running battles with German police and helped turn the city further on its head.

Those that I spoke to felt the 2008 global financial crisis and the world governments response to it - that being austerity and a sharp rise in unemployment and precarious work in the youth labour market, meant that the condition of capitalism has to be fundamentally addressed. Those that I spoke to felt that their futures at present had been sold off in the name of supporting the financial institutions and banks that had caused the recession in the first place, and it was our generation that was paying for their continuation. The majority of young people that were attending the demonstrations were young, politically charged and educated about the pressing issues that they feel are affecting youth across the continent. Others that arrived to protest the summit used more hardline means to express their views of government and corporations alike and the picture above shows just a

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snapshot of the wanton violence that occurred during the weekend. What cannot be ignored, is the fact that so many young people travelled so far to gather and express collective concerns that global unhindered capitalism is dictating the ability for people of my age to live the lives their parents had (secured income, opportunity to own a home, a guaranteed pension) and also the environmental costs that our generation will have to bear.

The final part of my research project took me to Napoli in Southern Italy. A city that has been ravished by youth unemployment caused by subsequent domestic political and economic failures. The city currently has 75% youth unemployment in certain districts. The city isn't shy of foreign investment, the city is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Europe but none of the money raised in tax revenue seems to translate in to bettering the conditions of its youngest citizens. From speaking to certain young people, a growing resentment between them and tourists is visible in places. They feel that their city is being turned into a theme park, with them not feeling any benefit from the tourism industry and only pushing up prices of commodities in return and 'making the trains even more unbearable than they already are' one young man commented. This sentiment is echoed across most major cities across Europe, with its native inhabitants becoming more and more disillusioned with this new economy that does not resonate with themselves. City officials across the continent seem to see it as an easier way to generate revenue rather than making their local economy truly self-sufficient and work for the many.

The loitering 'street kids' of Napoli and the 'road men' here in Manchester I found certainly share and reserve a similar level of animosity towards the state, police and



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the actions of institutions such as schools and the workplace as a way of dictating the ways they live their lives. However they share a completely different set of cultural values. For example, the youth in both cities had strong opinions on tourists to their respective cities, but transmit how they feel about them in different ways. Being able to speak to people of my age across the great nations of this continent I have found we perceive issues in different ways and prioritise them as such. We are in a state of global flux, the things youth across Europe experience and forecast seem to tell a much bigger tale.

### Project expenditure and sources of funding

- + Award from Zochonis Enterprise Fund - £400
- + Personal savings comprised of student finance and wages earned - £900

= £1300

- European railway pass (Valid for thirty days) - £420
- Food and subsistence - £500
- Accommodation (Hotels & Hostels) - £250
- Travel insurance - £20

= £1190