

Austrian UPF Youth Committee organizes Event at Vienna University

Vienna, Austria, 22. May 2017



By Elisabeth Cook

On May 22nd 2017 the Youth Committee of UPF-Austria organised a panel discussion at the University of Vienna on the theme:

“Walls of Bridges? Session II Populism, Integration & the Future of Europe.”

This event 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 spoke about populism. He explained that there is not only political populism, but also ecological and cultural populism. In political populism, we can observe populism of the right wing and left wing parties. In essence, populism mainly appeals to the emotions.

Mr. Meinel who wrote a paper then explained about the roots of populism, which are to be found in the 16th century when governments

became more centralised. He observed that today’s party system is out-dated and unable to change. He suggests 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 **Prof Ismael Yasin**. Having been a professor at Damascus University, Syria, he has lived in Vienna for 2 years. He was able to learn the language 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 (ÖIF), working in a project called “Treffpunkt Österreich” (Meeting Point Austria), in order to help Syrian and other refugees find their place in our country. “Knowledge is power and light, while ignorance is darkness”, he stated. “We need to know each other. We belong to different religions and ethnicities. But we all have one origin.”

He then explained shortly about Syrian culture, which goes back 9000 years in history. The three Abrahamic religions all started there (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and they have the same heritage. They have to find a way to work together.

His next topic was his work with Syrian refugees in Vienna and, in his opinion, the key to integration is

learning the language, but cultural integration is most important. That’s why he used to take the refugees to the historic places in Vienna, explaining the history and culture. He got very good responses to these programmes.

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

Nina Tsiklauri (her background is Georgian) presented the project “Pulse of Europe” (<http://pulseofeurope.eu/>). It is a citizens’ initiative for finding ideas of how to reshape the European Union. Every Sunday afternoon a group of volunteers meet at a public place, giving everybody who is there the opportunity to present his/her ideas for the EU. The action group was founded in Frankfurt, Germany, by a couple that wanted to create this platform to exchange ideas.

In Vienna, they consist of a team 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 we have been enjoying for several decades in Europe. Finally, people have to be

more informed about the European Union.

Aladin Naksh Bandi, from Syria, introduced “Smart Academy” (<http://www.smartacademy.de/index.php/en/home-en>) to the audience, a project which he founded in 2014, through which he offers tutoring and seminars for refugees in various fields, such as learning the language, legal advice and job opportunities.

The intention is to promote tolerance, understanding and goal-oriented thinking.

Mr. Bandi stated, “Seeing the situation of the refugees in Vienna I asked myself: How can I contribute to build 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 system!”

Mr. Band is convinced that “If you perform well in your job and in social relationships, this is your treasure! Life is short, so let’s live smart!”

After the presentations, a discussion was initiated and chaired by the moderator, Ms. Vojna Ngjeqari.

As all four speakers emphasized an active approach to solving the initial problems refugees face in their new environment, a spirit of mutual support and inspiration carried the evening. Among the 60-70 participants there were many students from Vienna University with various cultural backgrounds, using the opportunity to learn and develop in a country other than their own.

The event was organized by the Austrian UPF Youth Committee, a group of 4 2nd gen members who engage in UPF activities.

A reflection of 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 organised by a group of active young people who represent the hope of our prosperous future. Joana P. was very impressive with her eye for details. Moreover, the

imprints of Peter Haider were clear in leading the young Ambassadors towards a culture of peace and tolerance, something that we need badly nowadays.

I was never convinced like today with the urgent need of 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, which took place in Manchester today only couple of hours after our conference of peace. Though all 17 UN Sustainable Development goals are important, the goal number 16 is what we need badly, i.e. peace, justice and strong institutions without which other SDGs have no meaning. We should stand up, join hands - regardless of religion, colour 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 will ensure that bridges of understanding, respect, solidarity and tolerance are built on solid foundations.”



Some 60 guests attended the meeting



Peace Ambassadors engaged in the discussions after the presentations