

## 4 pillars of the student movement

### Introduction

When starting this article, a first fundamental problem stroke me: how can I define that set of ideals, actions, principles, fellows, victories and frustration that become the life of the ones deciding to stand up for students and to dedicate precious years and energy for this common cause? Terms like student politics, student organisations, students NGO's, student representatives, sounding similar for an external reader reveal quite different understandings amongst individuals who are part of this phenomenon, which I will further refer to as the student movement. The diversity within the societies in Europe, specially the perspective on education, participation, politics and governance is reflected in the student societies, as well.

Principles like solidarity and freedom of expression can be regarded as propagandistic and old fashioned for the ones speaking of democracy from behind a computer more expensive than the whole year wedge of a professor in other parts of Europe. The student movement is not that rosy for all of us. Our colleague Tatsiana Xoma, was arrested in December 2005 for militating for students' rights, Belarusian Student Association being the only member of ESU operating clandestinely. It was one of the moments I felt lucky for being Romanian student after '89.

In the period of massification of higher education students' role as equal partners within the educational policies has been widely acknowledged<sup>1 2</sup>. Yet, the implementation relies mainly on the national and local level, where students are still seen as having a rather consultative role in many countries<sup>3</sup>. 2006 – 2008 the European Students' Union has been conducting assessments of the student movements in countries where a certain model of student representation has not succeeded to establish itself, such as Turkey, Kosovo, Armenia or Moldova. ESU has become a reliable partner providing expertise for international organisations acknowledged for their contribution to stability and democracy, such as the OSCE. For example, a common study visit was conducted in June 2008 by the OSCE office in Yerevan and ESU on the Armenian student movement<sup>4</sup>. Further on, ESU has initiated its own platform for development missions, coordinated by the Student Union Development Committee. This article is aiming at supporting the missions of development, targeting the student societies. Furthermore the concepts described below form a set of basic principles all student movement's bodies are expected by the students to follow. The article creates a reference for self-evaluation and open criticism inside the student body, contributing to the improvement of the student movement, especially of the relationship with the regular students.

### Context

#### 1. The democratic crisis in the society reflected on the student movement

In spite of its increasing recognition as progressive body fostering democracy, the student society is following the trends of the overall societies: turnout rates in election

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<sup>1</sup> "Towards the European Higher Education Area", *Communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague on May 19th 2001*, pages 2-3;

<sup>2</sup> "Realising the European Higher Education Area", *Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003*, page 5;

<sup>3</sup> "Bologna With Student Eyes 2007" - ESIB - *The National Unions of Students in Europe*, page 24;

<sup>4</sup> Junglubl, J.; Geven, K.; Proteasa, V. (2008) "Student Democracy in Armenia 2008" Country – study visit, June 8 – 14, 2008, Jens Junglubl, Koen Geven, Viorel Proteasa, page 1.  
[http://www.osce.org/yerevan/item\\_1\\_33041.html](http://www.osce.org/yerevan/item_1_33041.html)

processes are low, minorities face difficulties in being part of the political mainstream, the level of trust in the elected body is low, the population scarcely identifies itself with the elected leaders, examples of holding elected leaders accountable are best practices spread not as wide as we would like them to be<sup>5</sup>. We are facing a lack of participation both quantitatively, in terms of numbers, but also qualitatively. The impact is obvious: at the societal level, parties are losing members and especially the youth is turning its back on the politics. The political crisis between voter and the leader is transferred to student societies as well. Acting exemplary is not enough for winning the full trust of regular students; it needs to be accompanied with prejudice breaking measures.

## 2. Students on the forefront of changing the world

Democratic Europe was shaken by the social movements in 1968, a strong reaction to “old society”, seen as replacement of the traditionalist morality (religion, patriotism, respect for authority) with the liberal morality (equality, sexual liberation, human rights) that dominates European societies today. New political streams increased their visibility, such as environmentalism and female emancipation. Students were at the forefront of the protests in Spain, Italy, West Germany, Great Britain, Belgium and specially France, where UNEF led the “French May”: aprox. 500 000 protestors; De Gaulle government close to collapse.

'68 echoed through the iron curtain. Chronologically, '68 protest followed polish January and March student protests for student rights and against communism, fought back by the regime with anti-protests under the form of “worker-squads” and police interventions. The movement had a liberal background and claimed freedom of speech for intellectuals and artists. The '71 student protests in Croatia were more national oriented, militating for the education in Croat language. All in the context of the Prague spring.

'68 protests were preceded by the '56 Hungarian revolution. Noteworthy is the fact that university students in Szeged snubbed the official communist student union, the DISZ, by re-establishing the MEFESZ (Union of Hungarian University and Academy Students), a democratic student organization, previously banned under the Rákosi dictatorship<sup>6</sup>. Romanian students, mainly in Timisoara, protested in sign of solidarity with their neighbours<sup>7</sup>. It was the first phenomenon of students violently conflicting with the imposed communist student organisations, used as a tool of propaganda and repression by the regime. Such a system has survived nowadays, in Belarus<sup>8</sup>.

## 3. Diversity within the European student movement.

At the basis, the student movement is addressing social and academic issues students are dealing with. For organizational functioning, it also does administration and development of the organisation itself. Though, student representatives are very different, from the dressing code and rhetoric to attitude towards political concepts. The variety results, besides the contemporaneous context of the society and the political heritage, from the culture of the societies. The cultural identity of a society expresses itself through its symbols (words, gestures, and objects), heroes or role

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<sup>5</sup> Proteasa, V. (2008). *General Report 15th European Students' Convention*, pages 3-4. <http://www.esu-online.org/index.php/Publications/conference-documents/46-european-student-conventions/251-esc15>;

<sup>6</sup> Crampton, R. J. (2003). *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century—and After*, p. 295. Routledge: London. ISBN 0-415-16422-2.

<sup>7</sup> Hossu Longin, L. (1993). “Memorial of grieve – 1956 student movements, after the Hungarian revolution”, Romanian Television TVR – documentary;

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.esu-online.org/index.php/News/news-archive/158-student-persecution-in-belarus-persists>.

models, rituals or ceremonies, and the values shared implicitly by all. The culture of one society can be defined by a set of dimensions, such as: distance towards power, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/feminism, reaction towards uncertainty and short term/long term orientation<sup>9</sup>. Mobility has contributed greatly to the smoothing of cultural differences, but the main factor of exposure to different culture is Internet and TV.

## **The four pillars**

### *Approaches in the student movement*

As an effect of the facts presented in the previous paragraph, the approaches within the student movement are quite various. On one extreme we have the grassroots movements. They are generally reactive, intense when problems are acute. Structurally, they follow the net model. The power positions are communication branch points and negotiation fore fronts. They are unstable, as they do not follow a certain strategy. At the other extreme, there is the “mirroring of institutions” phenomenon. The movements adapt themselves to the requirements of the dialogue with the relevant institutions. The role of the representatives is mainly policy making. The structure is regulated and hierarchical. Activities are focused on research and politics. Medium and long term strategies are followed. The stability of such organisations is high.

Noteworthy is the fact that this is not necessary a dichotomy. There are cases of organisations that have successfully embraced both approaches. A balanced combination of the two is a prerequisite of success. The “balance” depends on the level of representation: local, national or European.

### *What makes it to be a social movement?*

Originally, a social movement is generated by a discrepancy in the society that is affecting a large mass of the population. It generates a re-settling of powers inside the society. The discourse is stormy and it moves large masses of population. It is led by inspiring and charismatic personalities, benefiting of great support and recognition from the masses. It organises itself for a cause and loses momentum as the trigger cause is removed.

The European societies have developed, eliminating the discrepancies triggering social movements. Though, we still witness expressions of movements; the means of expression have also evolved. Amongst the features that differentiate a modern movement from a regular NGO I will nominate some that I consider defintory:

- Legitimacy is regarded as the top principle when deciding on a strategy;
- It installs accountability procedures towards the represented population;
- It is built on the concept of solidarity;
- It possesses latent striking potential that can be triggered by the changes in the society context.

Student unions are generally fitting into the “social movement” model.

The “Ljubljana declaration” created at the 15<sup>th</sup> European Students Convention in Ljubljana in March 2008 defines a set of four basic pillars that represent the spine of

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<sup>9</sup>Hofstede, G. <http://stuwwww.uvt.nl/~csmeets/PAGE3.HTM>, at <http://www.geerthofstede.nl>, accessed on November 13<sup>th</sup> 2008.

all democratic student movements: representativeness, openness, democracy and independence<sup>10</sup>.

### 1. Representativeness

In a student oriented perspective, it can be defined as the measure in which the student movement bodies reflect the formal characteristics of the student population, derived mainly from the formal structural and political organization of the tertiary education system of one country. Indicators can be:

- The total number of students that are involved in electoral processes, accordingly to the official regulations and in reality;
- The regional balance, once there is no substantial difference in access to representation bodies within the regions;
- The institutional typology balance (private / public and universities / polytechnics / colleges), in the same terms.

In terms of politics, representativeness is defined by the reflection of the legitimate interests<sup>11</sup> of the student body in the policies promoted. The policies of the student movement should be the students' response to the educational policies promoted by the authorities. The legitimacy and the relevance of the student union' policy can be used as qualitative indicators for representativeness.

The relation between the elected bodies and the student electorate is another indicator of representativeness that deals with the internal politics of the student unions.

In a society context, the student population should represent the overall society and student unions have the role to foster it. This approach opens the debate on accessibility and empowerment.

### 2. Openness

One aspect of openness is accessibility of the student unions, in terms of socio-economical background, race, sexual or political orientation, gender, religious beliefs, disabilities or any other individual particularity that can limit access<sup>12</sup>.

Under formal terms a student union is accessible if no discriminative policies are in power. But the practice has shown formal aspects are not enough, as the society continues to limit access in an informal manner, despite the formal policies. Empowerment policies can be used to ensure accessibility for groups less present in the student unions, but with clear targets of participation and for a certain period of time. The permanence of empowerment policies can be perceived like an infringement to democracy.

One illustrative effect of accessibility is the fact that the elected bodies become a reflection of the diversity within the student population.

The other key aspect of openness is the possibility of regular students to represent their fellow students. All students have to have the possibility to run for elections and

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<sup>10</sup>ESU, (2008) "ESU contribution to the development of student democracy" – declaration of the 15<sup>th</sup> European Student Convention

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*;

<sup>12</sup> *Idem*.

to be voted upon. The only quality required from a student representative is the capacity to represent ones electorate and the voting students are the only ones who can judge it. Though, the breaches in openness are a rather to familiar phenomenon. An example is the existence of formal policies limiting the openness on academic performance grounds, but most of the discriminative practices do not have a formal basis.

### 3. Democracy

Democracy is indicated by two processes closely correlated: elections and decision making. No matter the structure of the student union – plain or pyramidal, it needs to be democratic and grounded on a popular vote. The decisions have to follow an established flow, each level of the hierarchy having its own range of decisional competencies. For example, a core policy such as the reaction against tuition fees has to be adopted by a lower hierarchy body, as close to the student population as administratively possible, while operative decisions are being taken by the relevant bodies, linked to the individuals implementing them. Once a hierarchical level is installed, it has to be accompanied with the decisional competencies allowed. The way these competencies are being respected reflects the level of democracy within an organisation, as well.

Pluralism is one of the features of democracies. Student bodies need to promote pluralism and secure it inside their structures. One should feel comfortable expressing one's beliefs. In a body as diverse and educated as the student unions clashes of opinions are normal and welcomed, contributing to the progress of the organisation. Critical voices need to be identified and consulted when building and argumentation on behalf of the student population<sup>13</sup>. By no means dictatorship of the majority, nor of a minority is acceptable.

The electorate needs to be able to use tools to hold its representatives accountable. In order to achieve it, the leaders have to use rational methods of planning and consulting the student population, based on effectiveness. In case of deferred success, the “lack of participation” on behalf of regular students cannot be a valid excuse, but the student population can be entitled to accuse its leaders of using inappropriate methods. Information and communication are playing a great role in this relation. Furthermore it is an implicit obligation originating from the need of progressing that the student leaders are acting also as educators in issues of student participation and politics. Inspiring leadership that follows the needs and expectations of the students can help solving the democratic crisis in the student movement.

### 4. Independence

Independence can be defined as the absence of any mainstreaming influence in representation and the democratic processes, such as elections and decision making<sup>14</sup>. Student unions are sensitive to the influence of the stakeholders they are interacting with: HEI's administration, government institutions, political parties.

As a result of the acknowledgement of students being part in the academic community, they participate through representatives in governing bodies of the higher

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<sup>13</sup> Junglubl, J.; Geven, K.; Proteasa, V. (2008) “Student Democracy in Armenia 2008” Country – study visit, June 8 – 14, 2008, Jens Junglubl, Koen Geven, Viorel Proteasa, page 9. [http://www.osce.org/yerevan/item\\_1\\_33041.html](http://www.osce.org/yerevan/item_1_33041.html)

<sup>14</sup> Proteasa, V. (2008). General Report 15th European Students' Convention, pages 1-2. <http://www.esu-online.org/index.php/Publications/conference-documents/46-european-student-conventions/251-esc15>

education institutions. Independence requires that the elections are being carried with no interference relevant for the results, formal but also informal, from forces outside the student body. Students also participate in quality assurance, ethics or anti-corruption units; their capacity and involvement is not homogeneous over Europe. The student movement strives for students delegating all their representatives. The mandate of representation has to be drafted by the relevant student body, with stakeholders input limited to information points and debates.

The existence of regulations endorsing student elections and representation processes contribute heavily to the independence of the student movement. They are a necessity in countries where the formal system of governance is overlapping the informal one in a functionally effective manner. In other cultures, where the system functions, but not because of the written regulations, formalism is not a sufficient prerequisite for independence; its effectiveness is indicated by the way the academic community is internalising the formal policies.

The sensitive issue of independence is the relation with the political parties. The student movement is strongly ideological, because its union feature: representing a rather compact mass of educated population, whose “capital” is “brain power” and age. The history contributes to this mismatch: the student unions strongly influenced by the '68 movements in non Warsaw pact countries find easy and normal to identify themselves with a leftist ideology, while the rest of Europe is caught in an ideological twist. The leftist ideology is associated in some cases with the heritage of totalitarianism. Romania: '90 peaceful street protests against communism in the University Square, involving a large mass of students were “muted” with cubed miner squads, called upon by Ion Iliescu, the most prominent leader of the Romanian social democratic party<sup>15</sup>. Bulgaria: the Socialist party was created after a decision of the Communist Party to abandon Marxism-Leninism. Poland: primary elections organized by PSRP in 33 universities before parliamentary elections on 21.10.2007 indicated 72,69% preferences for center-right and rightist parties<sup>16</sup>. **A relation between party ideology and political independence cannot be established.**

Yet, the thin line is sometimes crossed. How can we spot political parties intrusion in the student movement? It all depends on the national context, but it can be generalised like the impact of non-student forces on the policies and actions of the student movement, such as endorsing political positions with no/little consultation/agreement with the student body, “laundering” the image of political leaders not popular amongst students. Formal evidences of interference are difficult to bring in such cases.

Formally, we can delimit political parties intrusion as situations when student bodies' decisions are being influenced by the party decisions in a hierarchical manner.

One of the means of safeguarding student unions independence is ensuring administrative autonomy, as in the student union being the one owning control over its resources: office, bank account, juridical personality, budget, equipments etc.

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<sup>15</sup> Brotea, J., Béland, D. (2007). “Better Dead than Communist!” Contentious Politics, Identity Formation, and the University Square Phenomenon in Romania - scholarly article, York University, Toronto, Canada;

<sup>16</sup> Student Parliament of the Republic of Poland, [http://www.psrp.org.pl/?sub=artykul&id\\_aktualnosci=1214](http://www.psrp.org.pl/?sub=artykul&id_aktualnosci=1214)

There are other cases independence breaches such as the intrusion in the democratic processes of alumni or the army. They are isolated and very specific, deriving from the national context.

However, excessive safeguarding of independence can lead to societal isolation, moving the organisation away from its initial purposes and decreasing its representativeness.

## **Conclusion**

There is no single model of implementing the above-described pillars. When issuing judgements on the capabilities of a certain model, one has to get acquainted with the society in which the model is performing and to understand the tensions between the organisational environment and the outside context.

Implementing correctly the four pillars, in respect to the national context, will lead to:

- Increased legitimacy in building a political message;
- Credibility in lobby and advocacy activities;
- Reliability in ample activities on individual students or member organisations (in case of “umbrella” structures)

The European student movement is rich also because of the various means of implementation of the four pillars model and because of the capacity to exchange this practices for self-improvement.

*The argumentation for this article is based on a European perspective and was built by preparing and conducting study visits, during debates with my fellow members of the study visit teams and with representatives of various actors in Higher Education. I would like to appreciatively recall the study visits to Albania, Ukraine, Turkey, Moldova and Armenia. A special refining effect was added to my argumentation by various points I had to defend against my fellow national representatives within ESU. The work for the 15<sup>th</sup> European Students Convention in Ljubljana, entitled “Students for democracy” has brought a final analytical perspective.*