Youth workers, the agents of solidarity

YOUTH WORKERS · YOUTH SPACES ·
LOCAL COMMUNITY · EMPLOYMENT · ACTIVISM
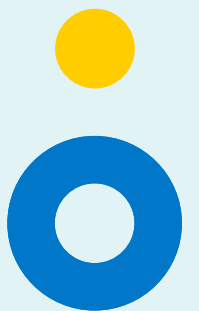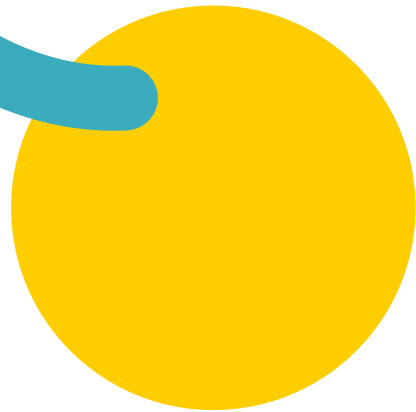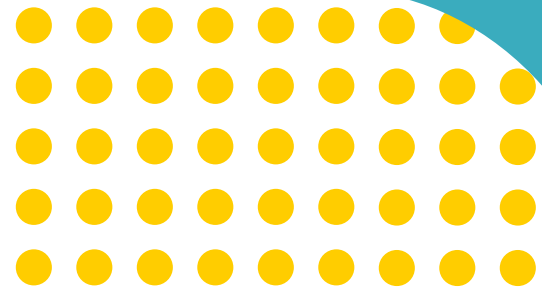
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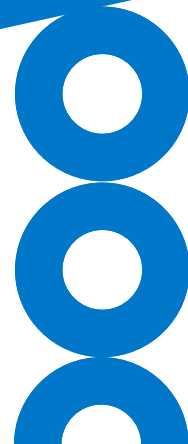
ABSTRACT

This paper compares interpersonal, collective and systemic solidarity, and analyses the conditions for creating each of them. It explores how youth work enables the building of solidarity in the youth sector, and how it can contribute to replicating such solidarity elsewhere. Observing the actions of youth workers, the paper proposes the idea that youth workers gradually become agents of solidarity in society, embracing solidarity as part of their calling.

Inspired by a real story of a young person looking for a job and a youth worker supporting him, the paper explores the relationship between social activism and solidarity on a community level. It analyses the meaning of solidarity as a social phenomenon and its influence on individual and group actions. It investigates whether solidarity is always built around shared concerns, and seeks to understand the potential and limitations of solidarity as a driver for social change.
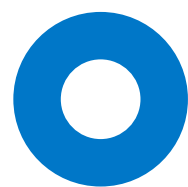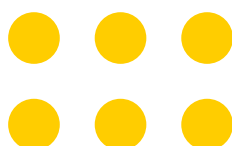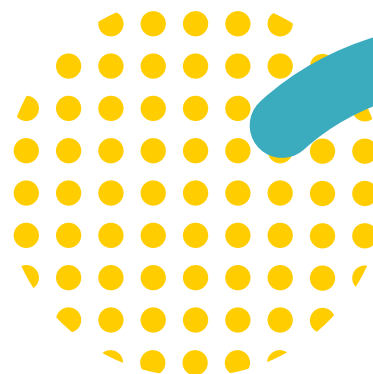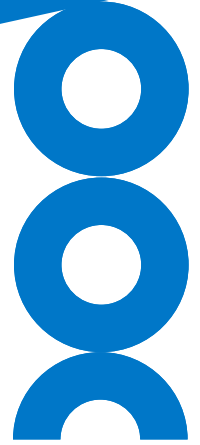
1. Solidarity in a Cocoon

"Petar is 31 years old and every time we have a conversation, he tells me how he wants to have a job. Like I do, like most people do. This breaks my heart. It is hurting me to imagine how horrible it is to not have any job at all for 13 years." This is how Elena Danova, a youth worker, begins the story of her involvement in Petar's quest for employment. She and her fellow youth workers spent years supporting Petar at the local youth centre, all the while working patiently with his family and with local institutions, waiting for something to happen. The waiting continued until Elena decided to take a radically different approach, one that has finally put Petar's story in the spotlight.

If one wants to explore how solidarity can play a role on a community level, going to a place like Kavadarci would be a good beginning. This town in North Macedonia is a small community where people generally know each other and social ties are strong. It is a place where group values are important and very influential for people's behaviour. Adhering to the norm and avoiding being different makes life easier. This was the setting where Elena and Petar met six years ago. Petar was one of the beneficiaries in a youth centre, while Elena was a newly employed staff member. From the first moment, Elena observed that Petar had a noticeably different temper than the rest of the group – something she later understood was well known and accepted by others. "Everyone always assumed that he had a very marginal disability because of the way he functions", explains Elena. People knew that they had to explain things to Petar more than once, and that sometimes they had to be more focused on him in order to understand what he was saying. However, nobody ever dared to name his disability or even talk about it. The youth workers later understood that Petar's condition was in fact never categorised. It is easy to see how in a closed community like the one where Petar grew up, not having your child's condition categorised might not be a big deal. In fact, due to social pressure and public shame, it was probably the easier thing to do.

The youth centre that Petar went to was a micro community, where ties between the young people were strong and the levels of trust and mutual understanding were high. The centre hosted a small group of young people who shared a set of values and rules for behaviour, which dictated that Petar was to be accepted and included. One could often see young people taking care of Petar and explaining to newcomers how they are supposed to act. According to the study "4Thought for Solidarity", published by SALTO European Solidarity Corps (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020), what was at play was solidarity on the interpersonal level.
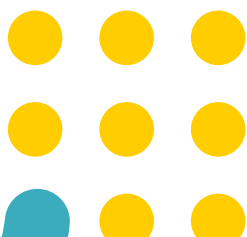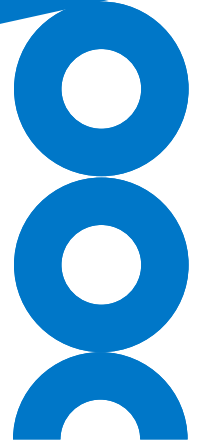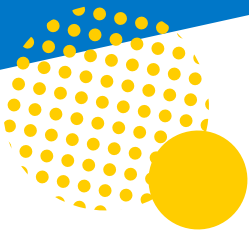
The study says: "Solidarity on the interpersonal level is related to how individuals connect, support and create cohesion between themselves. Trust is important here. Social solidarity can be shown in informal groups or networks and through volunteering, membership and support of voluntary associations, civil society organisations, and social movements" (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020).

The solidarity that drove young people's behaviour was indeed built on the basis of common membership, activism and volunteering. That acceptance created a world where Petar could thrive. Hence, he spent most of his time in the youth centre, learning how to communicate and cooperate with others. With the support from one of the other young people, Petar was also able to go for a short-term volunteering project under the European Voluntary Service. This example shows the value of solidarity created within closed groups of individuals. It also shows the importance of youth spaces and civil society organisations in creating environments where young people can learn and grow while feeling safe, regardless of their level of abilities. Creating and strengthening solidarity within youth spaces is something that can be considered an integral part of the role of youth workers, even if it is not explicitly named as such in their job descriptions. Day by day, youth workers work proactively on identifying the needs of individual young people and building a cohesive environment where everyone can feel included. It is often in youth spaces that young people learn for the first time about inclusion, equity and the importance of human rights. This is where they start practicing solidarity with the others and with the support of the youth workers as real agents of solidarity.

But what happens when young people leave the youth centre - for example when they become too old to be part of it? Do they face a similar environment of interpersonal solidarity in the other settings they are part of - school, sports club, neighbourhood, their extended family? From all we know about how society works, it is safe to say that this is not always going to be the case. It often turns out that the solidarity-nourishing environment in youth spaces is like a cocoon where young people can thrive - but temporarily. The possibilities of the youth sector to enforce its own values on the wider society are limited, and that is particularly true if youth work is done in isolation, not engaging with other age and social groups. Hence the importance of intergenerational and cross-sectoral youth work, which can provide some interaction and exchange between young people and other social groups. But even with that, the chances are the young people will forget about the learned values and behaviours when they are confronted by the rules of wider society - that is, the moment they step out of the youth centre. It is also at this point that the role of the youth worker stops or does one's calling as an "agent of solidarity" extend beyond the walls of the youth centre?
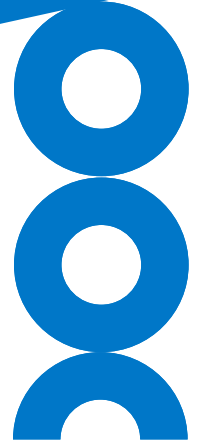
2. The Big Wide World, Where Other Rules Apply

The above mentioned questions were the types of questions that the youth workers faced in Petar's case. In various instances they could see that the solidarity built within the youth centre could not be easily replicated elsewhere. Different rules applied in the outside world. In the context of employment, those were the rules of the market economy. No employer was prepared to offer Petar a job, sacrificing efficiency for the sake of solidarity. The ones who were ready to do so requested official papers that would certify Petar's disability, which would make their businesses eligible for state support. As he was never categorised, Petar did not have such papers. The fact that he was a community member who could be productive with just a little additional support did not make any difference to his plight.

It is in moments like this that youth workers need to pause and redefine their role. Do you stand aside and let the other institutions in society do their part, or do you get involved? And if you choose to intervene, is that still part of your job

or is fostering solidarity an expectation that the world has from you as a human being? When you approach parents, teachers and institutions representing the needs of young people, are you still a youth worker or are you a fellow citizen?

Realising that Petar was facing a problem that was only becoming bigger as he was getting older, the youth workers decided it was their role to act. Together with Petar's mother, they initiated a process of formally categorising Petar's condition - only to face another wall. It turned out that one could be formally categorised until a certain age, and Petar had already passed it. Hence, they were told he couldn't get the papers he needed and no further guidance was provided. "The case of Petar is a systemic one", says Aleksandra Ristova, another youth worker who used to work with Petar. "There is a black hole over the next steps and nobody will tell you about any alternative routes. It's like the administrative workers in the institutions take the role of judges and law-makers, rather than service providers to the citizens." Having tried everything they could, the two youth workers halted their efforts at that time.

In a similar manner, like the business sector, public administration turned out to be an environment where solidarity in the case of Petar was not present. It seems that the representatives of public institutions are less inclined to engage in acts of solidarity. This does not necessarily mean they do not want to. In this particular case, as fellow
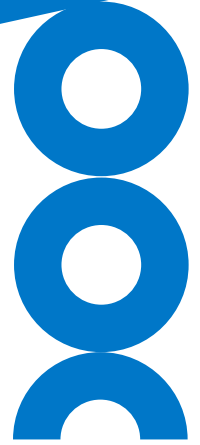
human beings they probably felt empathy and a sense of the injustice, but perhaps they had much less space or ability to turn that into action the way youth workers did. Acting on behalf of public institutions, the roles of individuals are predetermined by a strict set of rules, procedures and public policies. If solidarity is not inherently part of what institutions do and the policies they implement, then promoting solidarity becomes an incredibly difficult mission for the individuals who are a part of them. Should then, solidarity be at the core of public policies? Or should solidarity be even reflected in systemic structures and in the roles of individual employees? If we strive to build society based on solidarity, perhaps there is a thing or two government officials can learn from youth work.

The type of solidarity that we can hope to find in wider society is not the interpersonal one that we see in the small circles of individuals. Collective and systemic solidarity require much more consolidated efforts to be created. They also require a shift in mindset. Within small groups, finding motivation to act in solidarity comes naturally. At the end of the day, you are interacting with people that you know well, that you probably care for and whose actions also impact you. In the wider society, this becomes more ambiguous. Demonstrating solidarity in society means rising above one's individual relationships and caring for fellow citizens that in most cases you have never met. And that requires making conscious efforts and even personal sacrifices.

3. What Came First, Solidarity or Active Citizenship?

If we follow this logic further, it means that solidarity on a social level cannot exist without active citizenship. Indeed, the study "4Thought for Solidarity", listed active citizenship as one of the four main concepts that were; "highlighted by the majority of people from all four participant groups during interviews and surveys, as being the concepts closest to solidarity both in theory and in practice." (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020). The four participant groups in the study were policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and young people. The study however did not go into the question of whether active citizenship is a prerequisite for solidarity or if the feeling of solidarity leads to active citizenship or is it perhaps that both social phenomena appear side by side, constantly feeding each other in an endless cycle?

One thing is certain though, solidary is an active concept. Even in the case of interpersonal solidarity in a closed group, it is about taking a stand and acting. In the case of Petar, wider society passively observed how he was losing access to his rights as a citizen. The youth workers and young people were the ones who took an active role. They made an effort to understand Petar's needs and
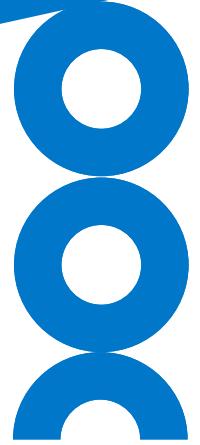
took concrete steps to fight for his rights in front of the public institutions. The preparedness to take action based on the shared belief in social justice and human rights was something they learned in youth work.

So, what happens to those beliefs when individuals are in a position to demonstrate solidarity on a wider social level? Do they get overshadowed by other types of motivations, such as preserving personal interests? In a youth work setting, youth workers are the ones who nurture the core values and facilitate the development of a group feeling of solidarity. Does society also need someone who will take over that role? Could that be something that youth workers should try to do, even beyond the walls of the youth centre? One of the youth workers in Petar's youth centre was about to find out.

4. Solidarity Going Social

Elena is what many would consider a social activist. She is never too shy to raise her voice over issues that matter to her. She speaks up, takes a stand and calls for action, driving society towards change. The causes that Elena fights for range from protection of nature from pollution, to fair treatment of women. Her posts on social media often provoke heated discussions, usually between community members holding polarising positions. Sometimes she is able to gain wide support and sometimes

not, depending on whether the community will recognise the raised issue as a shared concern. In one of the successful examples, Elena mobilised thousands of citizens to sign a petition that would prohibit activities hazardous for the environment on a biologically preserved area near inhabited places – something that was later on formally adopted by the local government.

Though very diverse, the issues that Elena fights for have one thing in common – they always represent the interests of a group of citizens. Her experience shows that people that do not know each other can act together in solidarity if they identify a shared concern. As a social activist, Elena manages to do something similar to what she does as a youth worker, albeit on a much larger scale. The feelings of solidarity that she helps build on a community level, inspire group actions that often lead to social change.

One day, long after she stopped working at the youth centre, she decided it was about time to try a radically new approach in Petar's case. She sat down with him and helped him write a facebook post asking for public help to find a job. Petar
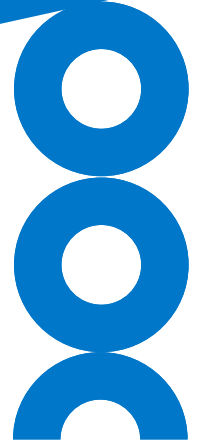
wrote that he has never been employed due to the fact that he is slower at completing tasks and that he needs support and assistance in his work. A few hours later, his post had earned hundreds of shares and reactions and became the most trending topic on twitter nationwide. Even the local media picked it up. People started calling and Petar found himself at the centre of public attention. The actions of hundreds of individuals that didn't know each other were suddenly inspired by a feeling of social solidarity.

Although very similar, this situation was different from other cases where Elena had asked for public support. This time it was about an issue that concerned an individual community member rather than a wider group of citizens. Creating empathy and nurturing a feeling of interpersonal solidarity had always worked well when Elena and Aleksandra had worked with a small group of young people in the local youth centre, a space where everyone knew each other. But could solidarity turn into a driver of action if community members didn't recognise the issue as one of common concern? One of the ways of defining solidarity, cited by the study "4Thought for Solidarity", is that it is "a mutual recognition of shared needs and concerns" (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020). Since this was not an issue of shared concern, what sparked the wide social response?

5. Solidarity or Personal Interest? Or Both?

To Elena it made no difference whether the issue concerned one or more citizens, she explained it in the following words; "The act of the community towards supporting an individual within that community is not only an act of helping someone get successfully through life, but more of getting the community united. Acts of support for an individual who is a part of that community strengthens the unity of people and gives a feeling of safety and comfort."

Unity is at the very root of the word solidarity, and the two terms have a similar meaning. The study developed by the SALTO European Solidarity Corps acknowledges this and poses the question of whether solidarity produces unity or if unity is required for solidarity to exist. According to Elena, it is the acts based on solidarity that bring people together. In a way, it's almost like the community needs to get behind a cause to become more united - even if the cause only concerns one individual community member. But Elena makes another important claim - it is this that makes people feel safe and comfortable. She goes on to explain that as a result of these feelings, people are more satisfied with their life being part of a particular community. Earlier in this paper we wondered whether personal interest could overshadow other factors that stimulate social solidarity. But could it really be that acting in solidarity is at the end of the day in one's own
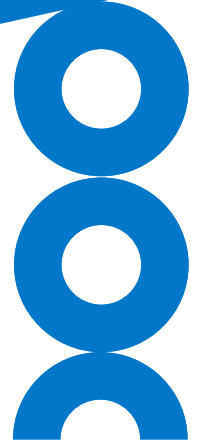
personal interest? Are we getting united behind an issue of a fellow community member knowing, consciously or unconsciously, that it is actually ourselves that are becoming safer and happier in the community? Are we showing solidarity to our fellow citizens, or to our future selves?

There is another argument that might support this claim. In their publication from 2018, Lahusen and Grasso speak of welfare as the third level of solidarity, this is in addition to the interpersonal and collective ones. The study "4Thought for Solidarity" quotes that: "Welfare for many people is directly linked to solidarity. To share resources, to balance inequalities, to redistribute wealth and economic risks is to act 'in solidarity' with others" (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020). But if we see welfare as a form of social solidarity, then the question is what drives people to support it. As a concept, giving up our own means in the form of public taxes for the sake of supporting others in need does not come naturally. According to Hasenfeld and Rafferty, in supporting welfare, people may be influenced by ideological preference and by self-interest. The argument of self-interest says that the supporters of welfare are mostly the ones who are either its recipients or at risk of becoming recipients. And "Empirical studies of attitudes toward the welfare

state provide some support for the «self-interest» argument in regard to the contributor / recipient factor" (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003). It seems then that people will act in solidarity with others if they think that they themselves might be in a need of such solidarity in the future. In another classification, the German sociologist Stephen Mau lists self-interest solidarity as one of the five types of solidarity, alongside fellow citizen solidarity.

But even if we accept that social solidarity is driven by personal interest, that doesn't diminish its value. However, it plays a role in how we advocate for solidarity and in the types of arguments we choose when asking for wider community support, all the while recognising that people will still have different motivations. To Elena and Aleksandra, the motivation has been to support a fellow community member, and a friend. To the mayor of the town, who invited Petar for a meeting, it was probably the expectation coming from his position in the society. From business owners, it could be the calculated effort to make successful PR.

The individual motivations did not play a role in Elena's expectations from the community. What she wanted to see was a community reaction with a similar amount of enthusiasm as hers. "I expected that people would use their contacts, call people, ask companies and engage themselves into doing a little good for their co-citizen and friend", she added. The fact that this did not happen to the extent she expected might have to do with our
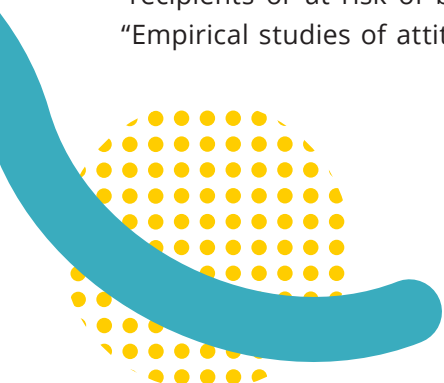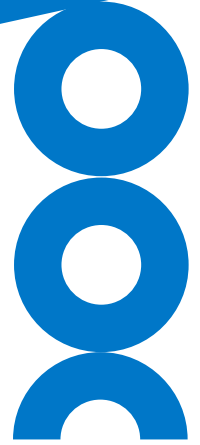
earlier discussion about the role of youth workers. After many years of supporting young people and being able to generate high levels of enthusiasm in the youth work context, Elena's youth work values shaped how she acted as a community member. Wider society does not necessarily live by those same values and so the response from the community was disappointingly lacking.

Even though Elena was becoming more comfortable with these values, and was expanding her field of action - the youth centre, the local community, and then the online world. The question arises again, how far can the role of the youth worker go, and what are its limitations. Maybe youth workers indeed remain as "agents of solidarity" wherever they go, because solidarity is the very nature of their way of being.

6. The Limits of Solidarity

The reactions that Elena received were mostly positive. But not from everyone. Responses on social media included statements that Petar was not the only unemployed person in the middle of a pandemic or that the mayor was not an employment agency. Some people entered in debates about whether this was an issue of wider social concern or not. Negative reactions also came directly from Petar's most immediate family.

Petar's mother is supportive of the cause, even though she is not convinced that her son needs a job. "It would be good if he finds something to be busy with, so that he feels more satisfied. It's not at all about the money", she said. She added that some of the family members saw the post as a call for charity and did not feel comfortable with it. Indeed, an untrained eye could easily confuse solidarity and charity. Thus, the study "4Thought for Solidarity" names charitable help, care and humanitarian aid as distinctively different from solidarity, because "Solidarity is group-bounded and there is reciprocity. These other concepts are all one-way" (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020). In fact, Petar himself wrote in his post: "Please help me get employed, so that I can finally feel like an active citizen who contributes to this society". That still didn't go well with everyone, and a few days later Petar's post was taken off from his facebook profile.

His family did not stop him from starting to work though. A couple of weeks after his facebook post first appeared, Petar started working for "Lice v Lice" - an activist magazine that promotes corporate social responsibility. Half of the price of the magazine goes to the salesperson, who sells the copies by visiting bars, companies and other public spaces. People from different marginalised groups work for this social enterprise, Petar being the first one in Kavadarci. It took Petar a whole week to sell the first three copies. Mobilising online support from community members seemed to be far
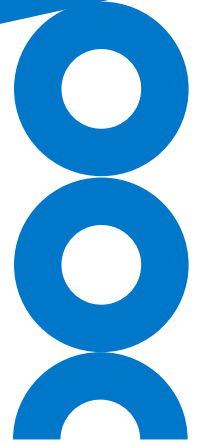
easier than convincing them to directly contribute to Petar's salary by purchasing a magazine. The limited success might also be another demonstration of the clash between the need to preserve one's personal interest and the desire to act out of solidarity. Or perhaps nowadays showing solidarity online is easier than in the physical life - in the same way that online activism is more convenient than activism on the streets.

7. The Aftermath

As Petar enjoys his first days of employment, the debate over the case continues. The coordinator of the youth centre creACTive where Petar used to go supports him in his efforts but insists that this is not a sustainable solution, and that the Mayor should provide him employment - just as he promised before the elections. And for Aleksandra, who now lives in the USA, the issue is much larger and more efforts are needed for resolving it. According to her, Petar's case shows that the laws need to be revised so that human rights are more accessible for everyone. "I am sure there are many others like Petar in Macedonia and that it is time for things to change. In the meantime, I believe that Kavadarci will take care of our Petar'', she adds at the end.

Identifying a gap in public policy is one thing; developing a new, solidarity-based policy is another. If solidarity is not inherently part of public policy and public institutions, the push for it needs to come from the citizens. Such a level of effort would require an even broader, nation-wide solidarity. Petar's post attracted national attention - but only for a very brief moment. The people who remained involved in the following weeks were ones from the most immediate environment. It seems to be true that solidarity becomes more difficult to build and sustain as the community becomes larger and more abstract - something to think about as we are developing international solidarity projects on a European level.

Elena's efforts also halted, at least for now. Youth workers might be agents of solidarity but they have limits as well. Building systemic and institutional solidarity requires involvement from other sectors of society. On numerous occasions, youth workers and youth organisations have shown how solidarity is built, both in youth spaces and in the outside world. The least other professions can do is follow the example. If all citizens and institutions embrace solidarity as a core value, then interpersonal solidarity can easily be extended to a collective and systemic one. And then all young people would be able to thrive outside of their youth centre in the big wide world.

Note: The name of the young person that this paper is based on has been changed to protect his privacy.
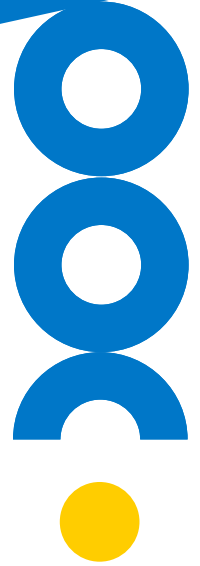
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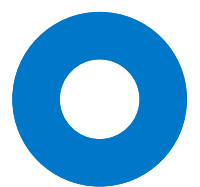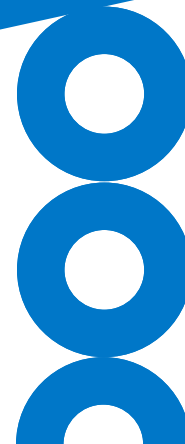
EUROPE TALKS SOLIDARITY

This article is part of "Europe talks Solidarity" – a series of events and publications that offers a platform for the exploration of the concept of Solidarity, initiated by the European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre (www.salto-youth.net/rc/solidarity). The discussion on Solidarity benefits from inputs from a wide range of experiences and backgrounds. However, the opinions and views expressed in the articles in this series do not necessarily reflect those of the Resource Centre.

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