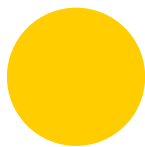
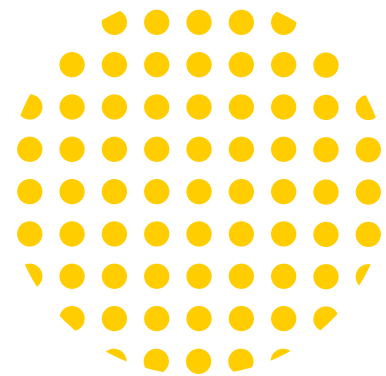
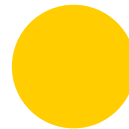
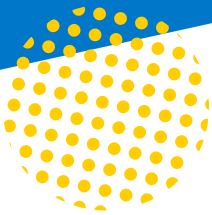
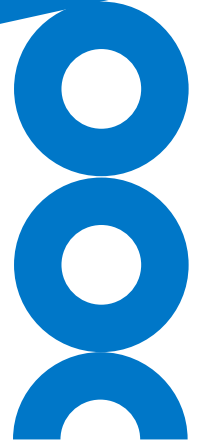


# Systemic Discrimination and Sustainable Solidarity



SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION • SUSTAINABLE  
SOLIDARITY • INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE •  
HUMAN RIGHTS



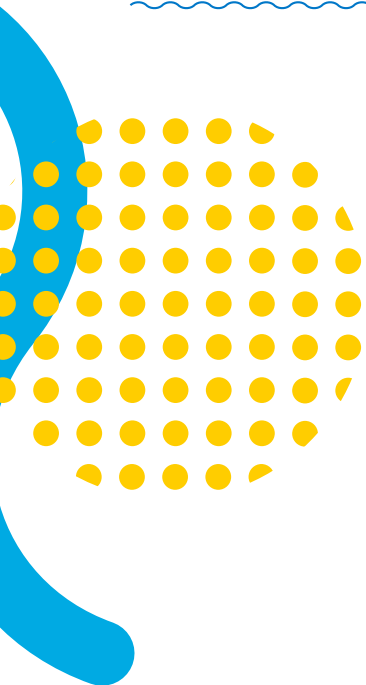


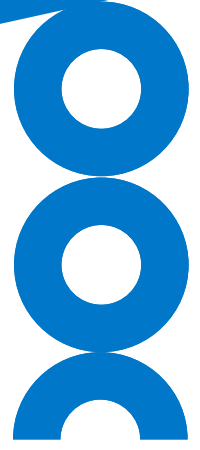
## Oana Nestian-Sandu

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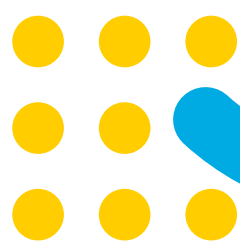


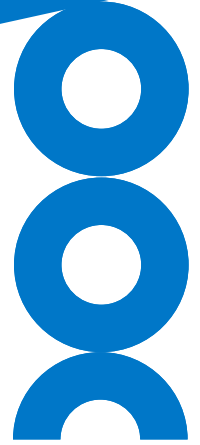
## ABSTRACT

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People have acted in solidarity in various ways throughout history, in various contexts, individually or in organised settings, with support from their governments or against their governments, fuelled by humanistic values, religious beliefs, political beliefs or even self-interest. What we expect to achieve when we act in solidarity depends not only on how we define solidarity, but also on how we define who is (or should be) solidary and towards whom they are (or should be) solidary. In other words, it depends on how a specific society views otherness, vulnerability, equality and / or resilience. Beliefs such as racism, religious intolerance, sexism, ableism, and heteronormativity, spread ideas that certain people are superior to others, that there is only one right way of existing in this world. People who hold these beliefs use categorisations to maintain a hierarchy of groups and to justify human rights violations. While human rights-based legislation is the cornerstone of a democratic society, legislation alone cannot ensure equality of opportunity. Certainly not if it remains only on paper and does not transfer into practice. Therefore, a more nuanced understanding of solidarity is needed in the 21st century to address systemic discrimination and to turn the concept of equal opportunity from a statement in legislation, into a reality lived by everyone. This includes initiatives that challenge the status quo, initiatives that aim to redress historical injustices or initiatives that shed light onto practices and beliefs that privilege (consciously or unconsciously) people belonging to a certain group.

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## Introduction

In a recent research commissioned by the European Solidarity Corps, the authors note that “there is no common definition and no common understanding [of solidarity] at the European level. Not in the official documents, not in the research, not in practical manuals and publications and not in direct conversations with young people, practitioners, researchers and policy makers” (Bacliija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020. p4).

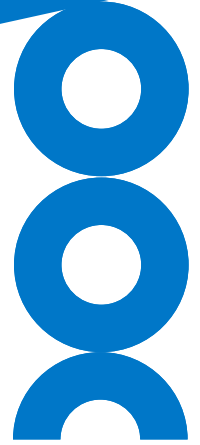
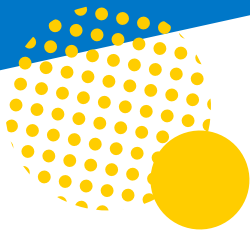
People have acted in solidarity in various ways throughout history, in various contexts, individually or in organised settings, with support from their governments or against their governments, fuelled by humanistic values, religious beliefs, political beliefs or even self-interest. Concrete manifestations of solidarity and the reasons for acting in solidarity are very diverse, and so are the goals of solidarity. The goals of solidarity – what we expect to achieve when we act in solidarity – depend not only on how we define solidarity, but also on how we define who is (or should be) solidary and towards whom they are (or should be) solidary. In other words, it depends on how a specific society views otherness, vulnerability, equality and resilience.

## With whom are we solidary and up to what point?

Many actions of solidarity aim to support people who are in a situation in which they cannot cover their basic needs. But the impact of humanitarian aid, welfare or individual help is limited and, while these types of actions are crucial in times of crisis, they have proven time and again to be unsustainable or to have the effect of keeping people in a dependency situation, instead of empowering them.

“Solidarity carries judgements about fairness, deservingness, reciprocity and justice” (European Commission 2018. p6) and what most Europeans seem to be saying today is: Yes to solidarity, but only to those who deserve it. TransSOL, a project that explored European paths to transnational solidarity in times of crisis through the lens of migration/asylum, unemployment and disability (2015-2018), highlights the conditional nature of solidarity. For example, when it comes to attitudes towards migrants, 7% of respondents in eight countries thought migrants should get access to social benefits immediately on arrival, 9% after living in the host country for a year (working or not), 42% after working and paying taxes for a year and 30% only after obtaining citizenship. About 12% across all eight countries categorically thought social rights should never be granted to migrants (Lahusen and Grasso 2018).





According to Sterjno (2011, as cited in Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020) the decisive factor for acting in solidarity or remaining a bystander, is the answer to the question: is this person in my group, in my solidarity circle? The problem is not how we answer this question, but the fact that we are asking the question at all, the fact that there is such a strong link between how we view our identity and who we deem worthy of solidarity. European (and other) societies have strongly focused on creating a national identity in the last few centuries, and, more recently the European Union has given a greater focus on creating a European identity.

Identity can be defined both as belonging to certain groups and differentiating from others - with variations in these feelings of being “inside” or “outside”. Identity is always defined in relation to other people; social identity is derived from simultaneous membership of specific groups and a demarcation from other groups. Our identity is created through constant comparisons with other people and groups.

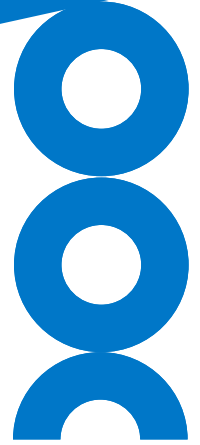
Individuals aim at maintaining a positive self-identity (Dutton and Roberts 2009) and feeling socially validated (Morgan and Creary 2011) and they use different strategies in order to attain this. One of them is to make a distinction between the in-group (“us”) and the out-group (“them”). The problem is that when group belonging is defined in opposition to other groups, it is not merely a categorisation process, it is a hierarchical distinction which

“accentuates differences and reduces similarities, saying basically that ‘we are good and they are bad’. Various social studies in the 1970s showed that the single act of putting people into two distinct groups was sufficient for creating a feeling of competition or confrontation with, in some cases, a quick escalation to violence and discrimination. The most famous example remains the Stanford prison experiment” (Nestian Sandu and Lyamouri Bajja 2019. p17). This worldview is enforced by a set of stereotypes which are continuously promoted in order to justify and maintain a hierarchy of groups.

Racism spreads beliefs that people with a certain skin colour are superior to others, religious intolerance spreads beliefs that people who pray a certain way are the only ones who are right and hence, superior to others, sexism spreads beliefs that people with certain types of sexual organs are superior to others, ableism spread beliefs that people with certain abilities are superior to others, etc. These types of categorisations are especially problematic when they lead to human rights violations on the basis of membership in a specific group.

Acting in solidarity to ensure that people can actually enjoy their human rights disturbs the status-quo and people who have traditionally been in power – usually men belonging to a dominant group in any given society – feel threatened. For this reason, it is more popular to promote





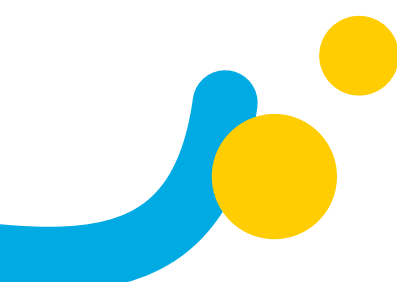
solidarity with people who are very poor for example, but not in a sustainable way, not in a way that will eventually help them overcome their adversities and have access to power. “The strengthening of solidarity – as a multi-dimensional phenomenon – demands multi-level and multi-actor approaches” (European Commission 2018. p11).

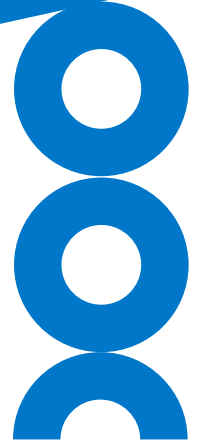
An important step in ensuring equal opportunities is to make changes in the legislation. These changes are absolutely necessary to combat discrimination, but much more needs to be done if we truly aim to build fair and equal societies. While human rights-based legislation is the cornerstone of a democratic society, legislation alone cannot ensure equality of opportunity. For example, in many European countries segregation of Roma students in school is illegal, but in practice, there are countless situations in which this legislation is not respected. Discrimination based on gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation and other grounds is illegal in Europe, yet studies show that it is still practiced on a large scale in employment, housing, and other services (Council of Europe, European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, ECRI).

This attempt to limit people’s access to rights is true even for matters that might seem straightforward, like the right to vote. Black people in the United States legally acquired the right to vote in 1965, but even after 55 years, there are still attempts to suppress this right, through actions such as gerrymandering. In Europe, Roma people are portrayed by politicians either as scapegoats for all the problems in the society or are completely ignored until their votes are needed. Then, politicians make empty promises or go to poor neighbourhoods to bribe people in order to obtain their votes. Even when people’s rights are guaranteed by law, the practice often fails to transfer legislation into reality.

Sustainable solidarity requires us to address systemic discrimination in order to turn the concept of equal opportunity from a statement in the legislation into a reality lived by everyone. This can be achieved through initiatives that challenge the status quo, initiatives aiming to redress historical injustices or initiatives that shed light onto practices and beliefs that privilege (consciously or unconsciously) people belonging to a certain group.

Solidarity has been declared a central concept for EU policies, programmes, treaties and measures (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020), but what it really means and who it actually refers to, is hard to grasp. While the EU promotes solidarity and invests in programmes focused on developing solidarity, it fails to ensure that all people can enjoy





their human rights, including the right to life. One might wonder: how can the EU promote solidarity, yet let people drown in the Mediterranean, or send them back out to sea once they reach the shore, or criminalise the people who are trying to help them? How can the EU claim to promote solidarity when only a handful of countries are accepting migrants or are implementing policies for migrant integration? How can the EU claim to promote solidarity, when almost half of its Member States do not allow their citizens to legally marry a person of the same sex? These realities show that “a solidary Europe” is a work in progress and urgent decisions and actions need to be taken in order to make significant progress towards ensuring respect for human rights for all people, not only for those who have EU citizenship, not only for those who have a certain skin color, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion or gender, etc.

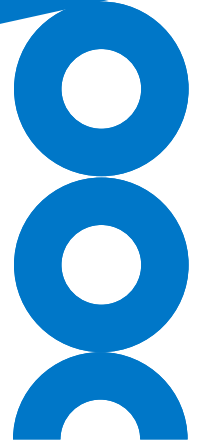
As one of the core values of the EU, human rights are enshrined by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Moreover, “Solidarity” is the title of Chapter IV which includes the right to work, the right to family, the right to social security and the right to an adequate living standard. However, even if it has been discussed since the late 1970s and it became a legal obligation under Article 6(2) of the Treaty of Lisbon, EU accession to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is still being delayed by negotiations.

Human rights are not just a legal concept, they are moral claims, which are based on two key values: human dignity and equality. Hence, it is not only legal professionals who need to have knowledge and critical understanding of human rights, but all citizens. Unfortunately this is not the case, if it were, solidarity actions would be motivated by a strong belief that everyone should be able to access their rights, by a belief of each individual that if other people enjoy their human rights this does not take away from their rights. In other words, it means that “I recognise inequalities and human rights violations,” and that “I feel compelled to act in solidarity with those who are facing those challenges” (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020. p70).

## What competencies do people need in order to act for solidarity?

The level of ignorance towards certain aspects can be sometimes very high. For example, organisations working for people with disabilities are trying to raise awareness of the limits enforced by how cities are organised. Through actions such as inviting people without locomotor disabilities to cross the town in a wheelchair or by posting flyers on windows of parked cars blocking the sidewalk, they aim to raise awareness. Some people truly do not know and have never thought of what it means to have a certain disability. Thus, the first thing in acting for solidarity is to find out what it means to





live differently than the mainstream population. While in some cases people's understanding of diversity is more nuanced, in others any initiative should start from the basic level of raising awareness. For a Union which has equality as one of its core values, more intentional actions need to be taken to address various levels of ignorance and to instil a genuine sense of solidarity in its citizens.

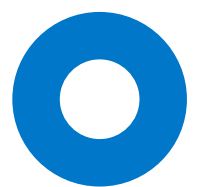
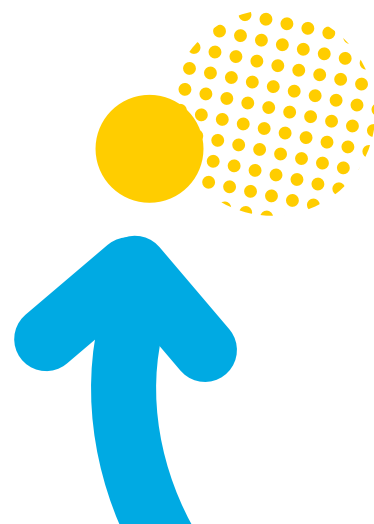
What should the EU focus on, in order to facilitate greater openness towards solidarity and concrete actions motivated by human rights? The answer seems obvious: education. But as obvious as it may seem, in practice it becomes more complex and it requires a deeper question: What kind of education?

A research on the European Voluntary Service found that, after the introduction of recognition systems and systems to track learning outcomes and competence development, many young people focused less on working with the local community and ensuring impact, and more on themselves. "With the focus on their experience and the development of their competences, there is a risk that solidarity becomes just another thing to be done in order to complete their CV" (Bacliija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020. p101).

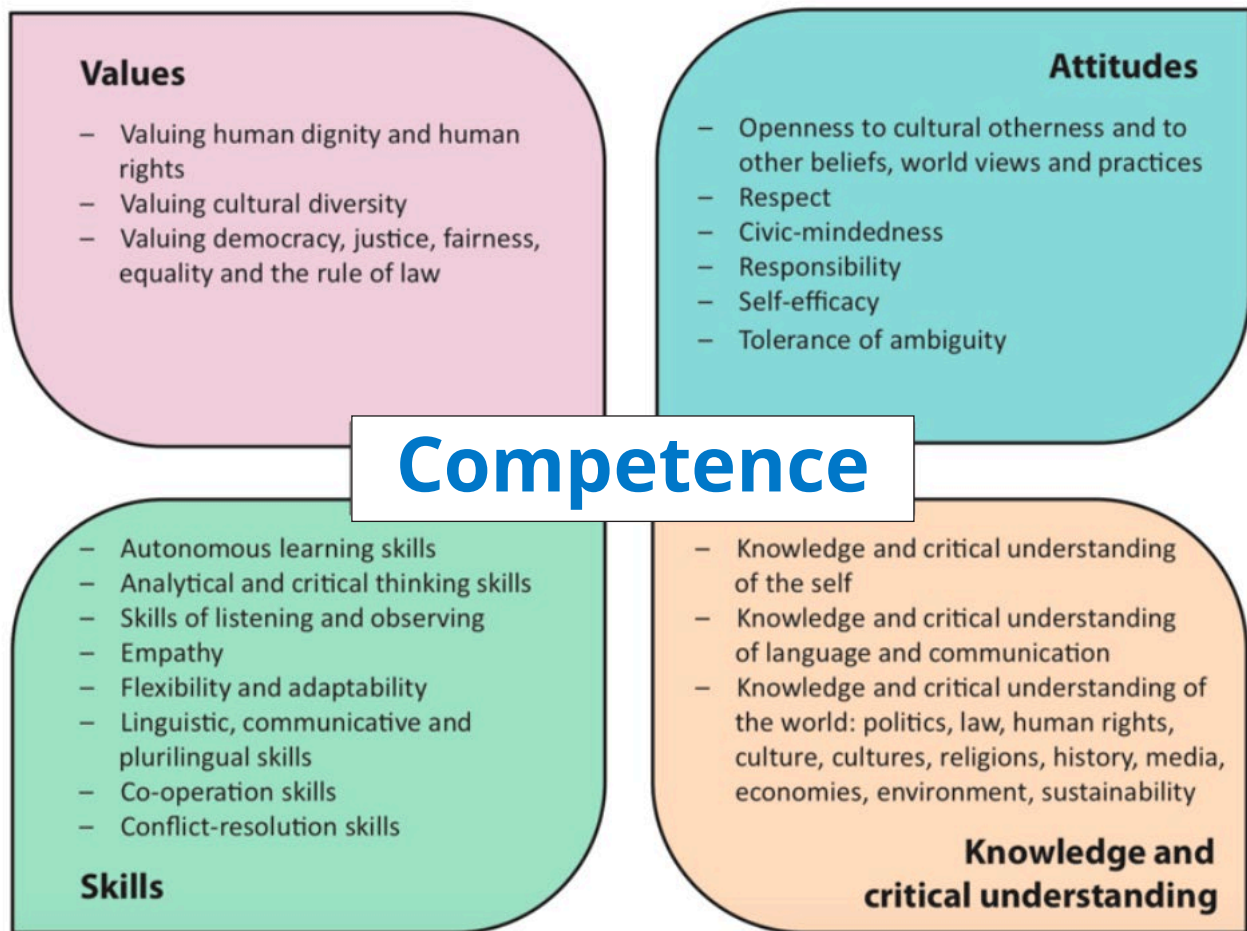
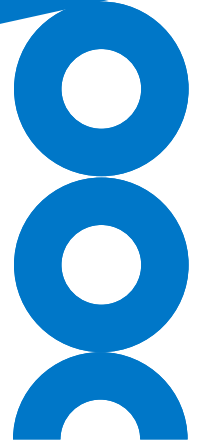
After the 2008 economic crisis, the focus of EU youth programmes was on employability because of the high increase in unemployment. But the premise was wrong, the unemployment was high

not because young people were unemployable, but because the values on which the economic system was built and the way in which society functioned were focused on profit, individualism and competition. In order to effect real change, European initiatives should not focus on making young people more employable, but on developing a value-based economy that has solidarity and human rights at its core.

An initiative that aims to change the paradigm is the Council of Europe's Reference Framework on Competences for Democratic Culture, which proposes a model of 20 competences categorised as: values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge associated with critical understanding. The purpose of this Framework, as stated by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe is to "support member states in developing open, tolerant and diverse societies through their education. It specifies the tools and critical understanding that learners at all levels of education should acquire in order to feel a sense of belonging and make their own positive contributions to the democratic societies in which we live." (Council of Europe 2018. p5).



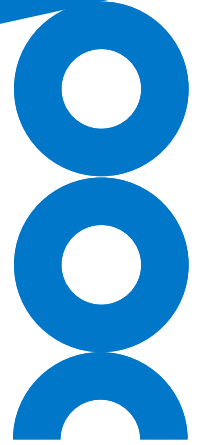




**Figure 1.**

Model of Competences for Democratic Culture.  
Source: Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, vol. 1.



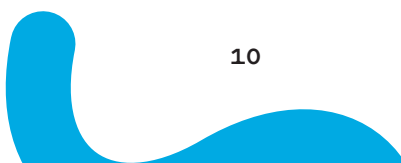


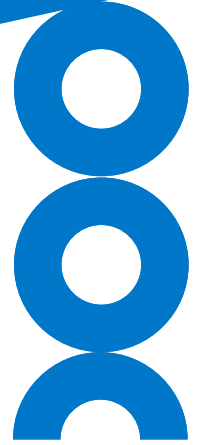
While solidarity is not included as a separate competence in the model, civic mindedness is defined as “a sense of solidarity with other people in the community, including a willingness to co-operate and work with them, feelings of concern and care for their rights and welfare, and a willingness to defend those who might be disempowered and disadvantaged within the community” (Council of Europe 2018). Community, in this sense, is viewed to include people who live within a particular geographical area (such as a neighbourhood, a town or city, a country, a group of countries such as Europe or Africa, or indeed the world in the case of the “global community”), ethnic groups, faith groups, leisure groups, or any other kind of social or cultural group to which an individual feels a sense of belonging. Moreover, the model is described as based on concepts such as “identity”, “culture”, “intercultural” and “intercultural dialogue”.

By putting these concepts at its core, it is clear that the model defines a goal for European societies and not a reality. In reality, it appears that intercultural aspects are viewed as marginal by Europeans. For example, the 4Thought for Solidarity Report – which includes a research conducted with policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and young people, aimed at identifying their main understanding of solidarity – found that of the four groups, the researchers were the only ones who identified intercultural competence as supporting their understanding of solidarity (Bacliija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020).

It seems counterintuitive that neither policy makers, nor practitioners, nor young people surveyed see a link between intercultural competence and solidarity. Especially given that for the 2019 activities within the European Solidarity Corps, the following outcomes were expected for the communities involved: “increased ability to address societal challenges; greater understanding and responsiveness to social, linguistic and cultural diversity.” (European Commission 2019).

If solidarity can be challenging in regular times, “in times of crisis, where citizens are exposed to feelings of scarcity, relative deprivation, and distributional conflicts, group solidarities might be either prioritised or sorted out. This could mean that citizens centre their solidarity more strongly on their own country and/or specific groups, even if they do not discard - in principle - the need to help other Europeans” (Lahusen and Grasso 2018, pp5-6). This type of attitude was very obvious when the Coronavirus pandemic started. Groups of people traditionally discriminated in various parts of the world were used as scapegoats for the spread of the virus, which led to an increase in racist incidents towards the Asian and Black communities in the United States (Ruiz, Horowitz Menasce and Tamir 2020), towards Roma in Eastern Europe (Matache and Bhabha 2020), towards Muslims in the UK (Birmingham City University 2020), towards Jews in Germany (Williamson 2020), and the list could, unfortunately, go on.





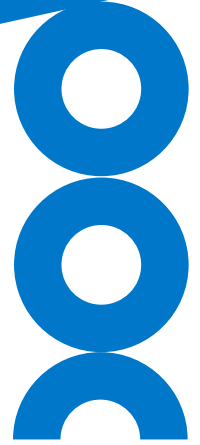
The fact that young people, policy makers and practitioners do not think intercultural competence is important in relation to solidarity (Baclijs and Nicodemi 2020), that they do not understand its value in practice or in theory, while disturbing, can be easily understood if close attention is paid to existing policies and actions. Few resources and initiatives that address this topic are available and those that are available are extremely superficial. The highest profile of them, the “European Year of Intercultural Dialogue” (EUR-Lex 2008), took place already 12 years ago. Even though one might expect that such an initiative would lead to an increase in the importance given to interculturality in Europe, it was not the case. On the contrary, Europe took a turn towards far-right ideas and policies in more than one country. If they are not completely rejecting migrants, most countries in Europe base their so-called integration or inclusion policies either on assimilationist ideas (you have the right to be here only if you become like us) or on segregationist ideas (you can live next to us, but not among us).

In order to change that, so as to achieve real integration and inclusion (for all the different identity groups residing in Europe who have been denied equal opportunities) and to make intercultural competence not as a far-reaching goal but an everyday reality, coherent programmes need to be put in place. These programmes should be bold enough to challenge the status quo and should aim at transcending in-group solidarity.

Relevant question to ask when designing educational programmes, aimed at increasing solidarity among European citizens, would be: why would people be curious to learn about other cultures? How can we make sure that people who pray differently, eat differently, look differently, love differently, etc. enjoy the same rights? What makes some people more inclined to appreciate diversity and fight for equality, but not others?

There are certainly many answers to these questions and there are entire books trying to address one or other of these aspects from theoretical and research perspectives. However, there is an interesting aspect that can be easily noticed, even in practice, which calls for a paradigm shift in the way anti-discrimination programmes are designed. This refers to the fact that if, through an organised (or unorganised) education process, a person who is biased towards a group becomes less biased towards that group, this does not necessarily extrapolate to other groups. An education programme focused on addressing antisemitism might make people less antisemitic, but those same people might still harbour anti-Roma, anti-Muslim or anti-LGBTQ feelings, just to name a few.





This is due, in part, to the difficulty of extrapolating and transferring the learning gained, but also to how these programmes are designed because they focus on a specific group. This is not to say that programmes should not focus on a specific group. There are many good reasons to do that, but in addition to such programmes, more focus should be given to advancing anti-discrimination and equality for all groups. Spaces should be created to address social issues from the perspective of all groups, including the intersectional<sup>[1]</sup> perspectives, which are still largely ignored in Europe.

A huge wave of solidarity was generated in the United States, in Europe and elsewhere, following the murder of George Floyd. What happened to George Floyd was not the first time such an incident occurred, nor was it the first time it was caught on camera. What made it different was probably the graphic nature of the video, the context, people have been calling for justice for such murders like these for several years, and the general situation generated by the pandemic. Millions of people around the world were able to see this terrible murder and could no longer pretend that racism was a thing of the past. Many people took to the streets and, at the same time, many people took to the bookstores. In June 2020, The New York Times reported an unprecedented increase in the number of books about racism being bought (Harris 2020). Popular knowledge of historical realities such as slavery, colonialism, the Holocaust and Roma genocide is limited. But these events

are still impacting our societies today and, again, education is the key that can unlock the door to a sense of solidarity. A sense of solidarity that does not contribute to maintaining the hierarchical systems (the richer helping the poorer or the superior helping the inferior) but one which paves the way to building societies in which systemic discrimination is acknowledged, unpacked and ultimately changed.

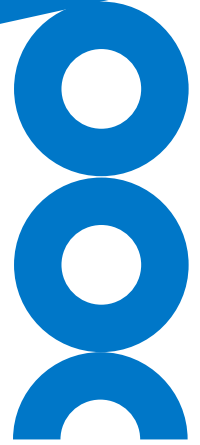
## Conclusion

The goals of solidarity can be very diverse and the actions can range from economic support, to moral support, to changing legislation, to changing attitudes, they can be group actions or individual actions.

There are countless examples of actions of solidarity throughout history, some more impactful than others, some more well-meaning than others, some based on respect for human dignity, others motivated by personal or group interests. The list of continuums could go on, but the 21st century calls for a more nuanced understanding of solidarity, it is well beyond time we addressed the “blind spots” in how our societies are organised.

While on paper everyone is granted human rights, everyone is considered an equal member of the society, in reality people who have been historically denied their rights – such as women, ethnic



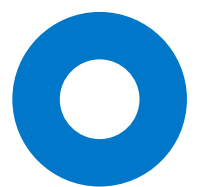


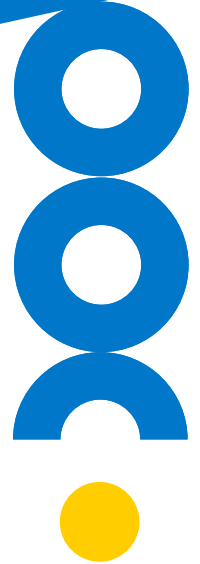
minorities, religious minorities, people with disabilities, people who are not heteronormative – are still being denied access to power and are far from having equal opportunities. An easy way to see that this is the case is to look at how diversity is represented at the highest decision-making bodies. When the members of an institution such as a Parliament all come from the same background it is clear that structural discrimination is alive and well.

Programmes such as European Solidarity Corps, Erasmus+ or Europe for Citizens should address systemic discrimination more intentionally and should contribute to the development of frameworks which challenge the status quo. But challenging the status quo cannot be done without becoming aware of our own stereotypes, of our own biases. In this sense, European programmes could be more impactful if they focused on creating safe spaces in which young people could challenge their own worldviews. For some this will be uncomfortable and may even reveal ways in which any of us could have acted in racist or sexist ways in the past. Awareness of own biases combined with understanding of the human rights framework can bring a different perspective both on the present and on the past.

Initiatives which bring a human rights perspective to historical understanding (Lücke et al, 2016) can help young people move away from using history as a way to maintain a positive identity about themselves or their country. Challenging the status quo and transcending in-group solidarity cannot be done if the past is seen as a series of glorious events in building our “amazing” country or Union. The past is complex, with positive and negative events alike. Being a good citizen who loves their country, who believes in the European Union, does not mean hiding all the negative aspects under the carpet and pretending that everything is ok, it means having the courage to learn the hard truths and to find ways to redress historical injustices.

Programmes and initiatives focused on solidarity can have positive and long term impact only if they are interlinked with value-based education. Otherwise, they risk to enhance the status quo, rather than challenge it and to completely ignore, as was shown by research, the intercultural dimension of our everyday lives in Europe.



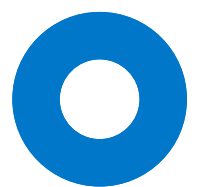


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[1] The Oxford English Dictionary defined intersectionality in 2015 as “The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise.”

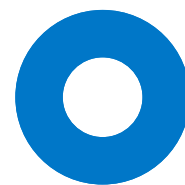
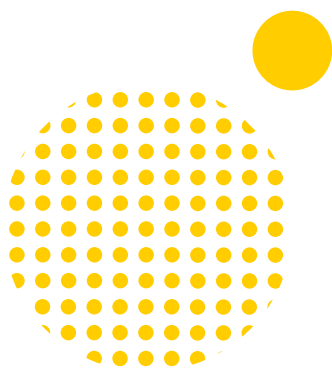
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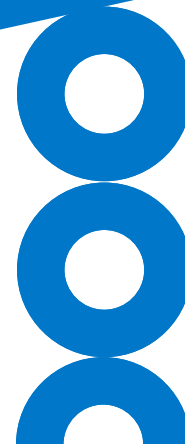
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## EUROPE TALKS SOLIDARITY

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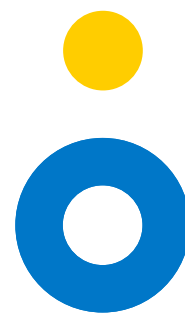
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