

Educational Briefing 2023

# Resilience in Times of Crisis





# Content

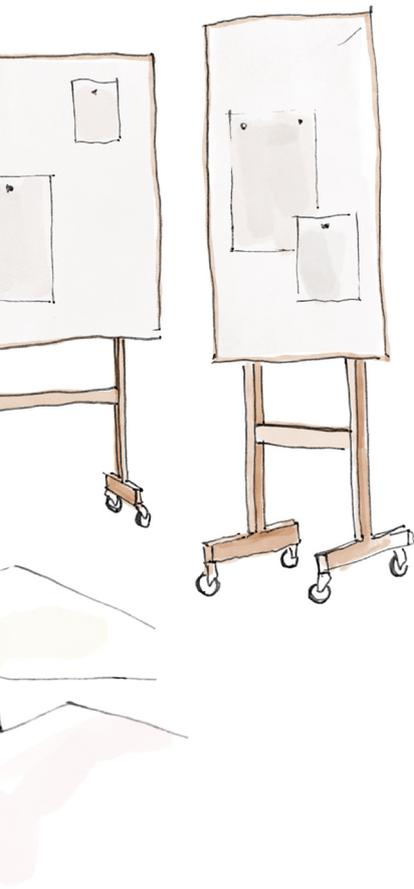
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- 04**      **Introduction**
- 07**      **Grow Through What You Go Through – Building Emotional Resilience in Challenging Times**  
by Dipl.-Psych. Anja Benesch
- 21**      **Strengthening Democratic Resilience through Education**  
by Rasha Nagem, Markus Pausch
- 33**      **The Role of Resilience and Solidarity in Times of War**  
Interview with network members Lisa Glybchenko and Davit Manukyan by Rebekka Pfennig
- 44**      **Imprint**

# Introduction

## Educational Briefing 2023

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Today, many young Europeans experience their everyday life marked by multiple crises: while they are still struggling to recover from isolation during the Covid-19-pandemic, inflation hits hard, and the terrifying news of the Russian war against Ukraine are a daily reminder of how fragile peace is. Fear, numbness, or anger are common reactions to this crisis mode.

In this year's Educational Briefing we are therefore tackling the question 'how can we develop resilience in the face of crises that threaten to overwhelm us?'. We can define resilience as the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and respond constructively to crises. Therefore, it is not only relevant for individuals to absorb shocks and stress but also for societies to cope, adapt, and transform in the face of challenges. Vitalising social interaction, encouraging solidarity, and enabling participation are crucial for the path towards resilient democracies.

To begin, the psychologist Dr. Anja Benesch looks at emotional resilience: how can young people identify what burdens them? How can they develop self-efficacy? And what does self-care look like? This publication is designed for people who are active in citizenship education and strive to shape their societies. For this target group, it is vital to offer tips on how they can implement self-acquired resilience in their work and thus help others.

In the second text, the educational scientist Rasha Nagem and the political scientist Prof Dr Markus Pausch advocate for resilience to assume an important role in citizenship education. Based on the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC) from 2017, they showcase methods and best

practice examples of how to empower young people against radicalisation tendencies such as extremism, hate speech, and conspiracy theories.

The third part focuses on young voices from the Understanding Europe network who have experienced war. Lisa is a national coordinator and former fellow of Understanding Europe in Ukraine and Davit has been involved in Understanding Europe Armenia in different roles. In an interview, they talk about their definitions of resilience, the importance of resilience and solidarity for their educational practices and what kind of support within the network they have experienced.

This publication shows that resilient societies need learning spaces where democracy and participation can be truly experienced. In Europe, we need to empower young volunteers and committed youth workers in their daily fight for critical thinking and against polarisation. Politics needs to provide sustainable and flexible support structures for citizenship education. If youth workers feel assured in their self-efficacy, they can help support others through the crises of our times. It is through such constant improvisation, learning and togetherness that societies become resilient.

We wish you a challenging and thought-provoking read!



# Grow Through What You Go Through – Building Emotional Resilience in Challenging Times

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by **Dipl.-Psych. Anja Benesch**

*About the author // Anja Benesch is a clinically trained psychotherapist with a German licence to practise, she is also a resilience trainer. She works in private practice in Berlin supporting people of diverse cultural backgrounds to overcome the many challenges we face in life and in our communities. As a trainer for mindful self-compassion, certified by UC San Diego - School of Medicine, Anja is dedicated to exploring awareness, compassion, and care for oneself as a powerful way to cultivate emotional resilience in the face of adversity.*

## **A psychological perspective: why building emotional resilience is relevant for communities**

As a therapist and trainer, I have cultivated ways to take good care of myself and to build my personal set of skills over years of practice so that I can be of service to others in their suffering. It became very clear to me that I needed to find myself in a place where I don't feel exhausted or overwhelmed by the suffering in the world, yet resourceful and able to listen to others with openness and curiosity, truly connecting from heart to heart. I am convinced that in order to be able to be with and take care of others, we need to realise our own condition first, and be able to take care of ourselves. If we are aware of our personal suffering, it can become a doorway to discover inner strength and gifts that help us overcome challenges and grow through them while connecting with others from that place. In essence, it is the core of resilience from a psychological point of view.

The APA (American Psychological Association) defines resilience as „(...) the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.“<sup>1</sup>

This is true for individuals as well as groups, communities and countries. While resilience does not eliminate stress or erase life's difficulties, it allows us to work through the stressors, move on without long-term negative consequences, and come out stronger. Psychological research demonstrates that the social resources and coping skills associated with more positive adaptation to challenges can be cultivated and practiced (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.).

When we are faced with an adverse situation, we may experience challenging emotions such as anger, sadness, fear, anxiety, loneliness and helplessness. If overwhelming, such emotions can actually decrease one's ability to solve problems and to turn to others for social support – abilities

we need to work through adversity. Therefore, it is key to learn how to navigate challenging emotions. Emotional resilience is the ability to regulate one's own emotions so we can stay calm and collected during stressful periods and eventually get back to a state of comfortable well-being instead of being stuck in negative emotions like anger. We may still feel affected by the stress but we take courageous steps to address the root cause of it and our emotional response is measured, even in the face of stressful and traumatic experiences.

One way to build greater emotional resilience is the practice of mindfulness and self-compassion. Research indicates that this type of practice is one of the most powerful sources of resilience available to us, radically improving our mental and physical wellbeing, decreasing depression, anxiety and stress as well as increasing life satisfaction (Kristin Neff, n.d.)<sup>2</sup>. Research has shown that self-compassion in particular is an effective way to cope with difficult and stressful emotional experiences (Allen

<sup>1</sup> American Psychological Association, Dictionary of Psychology. Resilience.

<sup>2</sup> Neff, K. (n.d.). Retrieved June 8, 2023 from <https://self-compassion.org/>.



and Leary, 2010)<sup>3</sup> – for example when adjusting to university life as an undergraduate, when dealing with health problems or a divorce. It can also serve as a protective factor for post-traumatic stress in combat veterans, just to give one example (Germer and Neff, 2019)<sup>4</sup>. If we dedicate some time and effort to this practice as individuals and in groups, we develop greater personal resilience, and will also impact those around us, be it our loved ones, colleagues, or students in our classroom.

In the following, we will take a look at what exactly we mean when talking about difficult or challenging life circumstances – and which of those might matter to you. At the same time, we will learn how to support ourselves to adapt to such demands, and how mindfulness and self-compassion provide possibilities and tools to use this as an opportunity for growth and to discover inner strength.

### **How stress helps us to build emotional resilience**

Stress responses can be different for each individual. Stressors of daily life can actually promote resilience as they help us to step out of our comfort zone and grow – at least as long as we don't start feeling overwhelmed and hence are unable to adapt. So a little bit of stress stimulates growth. As we are all different, it's worthwhile to take a moment to reflect on what causes us stress, and how we respond to it emotionally.

During a workshop on resilience at the Understanding Europe Coordinators' Meeting in May of 2023 in Berlin, Germany, participants named the following stressors: the many tabs

<sup>3</sup> Allen, A. & Leary, M.R. (2010). Self-compassion, stress, and coping. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 4 (2), 107-118.

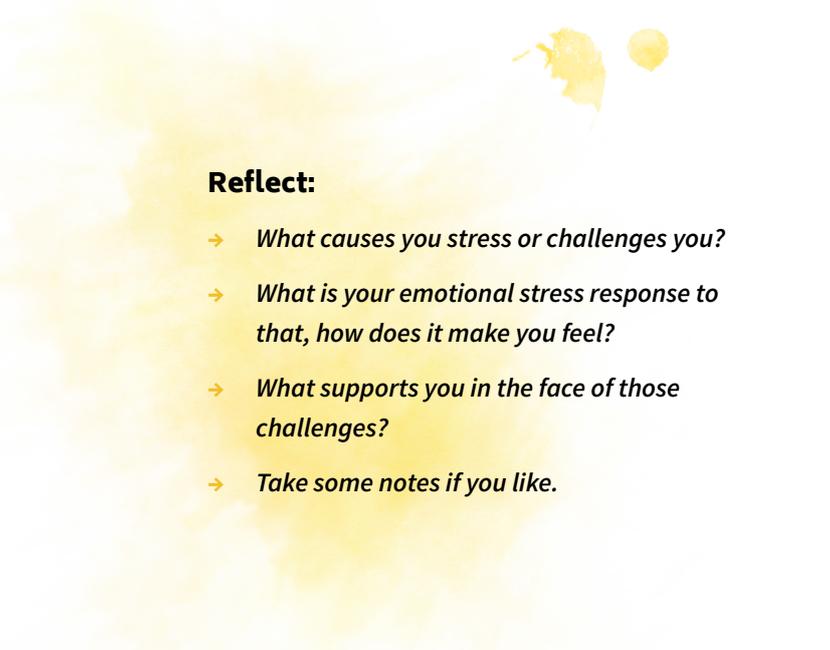
<sup>4</sup> Germer, C. & Neff, K. (2019). *Teaching the Mindful Self-Compassion Program: A Guide for Professionals*. New York: Guilford Press.

(meaning the list of things to manage), feeling lost / not belonging, living abroad and far away from family and friends, being overworked, one's (own) and other people's expectations, taking care of other people's needs, and not taking time for oneself and one's needs. Can you relate to these aspects, or what's on your list of stressors?

We live in challenging times of climate change with natural disasters such as earthquakes and flooding, with ongoing wars in Armenia and Ukraine in Europe, with polarisation and radicalisation, which are amplified by online platforms. In addition, young people are on the move between countries and lifestyles in the quest of living a life that appears both meaningful and fulfilling, while also paying the bills.

During the same workshop, participants were also asked what they perceive as supportive in the face of challenges. People pointed out that a main source of support is connection with people such as family, friends and fellow volunteers in the Understanding Europe network, feeling their

support, trusting them and relying on them. Other support was seen in finding purpose, reality checks, setting realistic short term realistic goals, and enjoying the outcome and results. People also mentioned the importance of balancing work and private lives, making choices, seeing opportunities and taking alone time to recharge. And last but not least: accepting the feelings arising in the face of a stressful situation.



### **Reflect:**

- *What causes you stress or challenges you?*
- *What is your emotional stress response to that, how does it make you feel?*
- *What supports you in the face of those challenges?*
- *Take some notes if you like.*

There are challenging situations we can address by applying problem-solving skills to change or shift them, but sometimes we feel there is nothing much we can do to initiate change – at least not immediately. However, it is important to remember that emotions and feelings arising in those situations are something we can always work with, even if they are not visible to others, because they arise within us.

### How do we know how we feel?

In order to work with our feelings, we first need to become aware of what adverse situation we are struggling with, what our emotional response to it is, and how that makes us feel, while reminding ourselves that it is okay to feel this way – thereby allowing ourselves to feel what we are actually feeling. Our feelings are considered reactions to our emotions, while emotion is “a complex reaction pattern, involving experiential, behavioural, and physiological elements”<sup>5</sup>. For example, a look at our to-do list can make us subjectively experience fear, with coinciding physiological symptoms of anxiety such as an accelerated heart rate and restlessness. The expression of our emotion can be frowning and sighing. If asked how we feel in that situation, we may answer overwhelmed and sad.

At any given moment we can use a simple mindfulness practice called STOP to check in with ourselves to see how we’re doing, and to become aware of our present experience, including how we feel.



<sup>5</sup> American Psychological Association, Dictionary of Psychology. Emotion.

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## The STOP Practice :

*One of the easiest ways to calm and recenter yourself in the midst of a stressful situation is simply to STOP. We use the STOP acronym as a brief mindfulness practice throughout the day. This can take just a few seconds. These are the steps:*

- **Stop what you are doing.**
- **Take 3 deep breaths.**
- **Observe – what you’re feeling in your body, emotions, thoughts.**
- **Proceed with what you are doing.**

*We can use STOP during any transitional moment, before having a challenging conversation, before a meeting/call, entering a room, etc. We are giving ourselves a little space and attention to be able to be mindful and self-regulate<sup>6</sup>.*

## The three components of self-compassion as a path to resilience

Once we know how we feel, we can explore what we might need in a challenging moment. And that’s where the practice of mindfulness and self-compassion can support us and enable us to build greater emotional resilience.

Self-compassion means treating yourself with the same kindness and respect you would treat a loved one or loved being. It is an ability that is inherent in all of us by nature. Sometimes it is not fully developed because of difficult childhood experiences, our own or society’s perfectionistic demands, or deep shame that masks other feelings. For most of us, it is easier to give compassion to others than to ourselves. However, everyone can rediscover and learn self-compassion, even when the habit of treating oneself unkindly is deeply ingrained and it feels unfamiliar at first to treat oneself in a loving way.

In order to gain a clear understanding on why cultivating self-compassion might be beneficial, let’s take look at the three components of self-compassion as described by Kristin Neff (Neff, 2003)<sup>7</sup> and the physiology of stress and self-compassion behind it. When facing a stressor or challenge, our threat-defence system is being activated and responds with fight, flight or freeze. If our stress response is turned inwardly, we react with self-criticism/self-judgement, isolation and over-identification/rumination, as the following table illustrates.

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<sup>6</sup> Germer, C. & Neff, K. Short Course in Mindful Self-Compassion (SC-MSC) Curriculum. January 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Neff, K. Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity*, 2, 85-102.

Stress Response	Stress Response Turned Inward	Self-Compassion
Fight	Self-criticism	Self-kindness
Flight	Isolation	Common Humanity
Freeze	Rumination	Mindfulness

(Germer and Neff 2018)<sup>8</sup>

If we practise self-compassion, our care system is being activated, and we are engaging with self-kindness, common humanity (for explanation of the term see below) and mindfulness instead, which lowers our cortisol levels, increases our heart rate variability, and generally makes us feel more safe, open and flexible when it comes to responding to others (Germer and Neff 2018)<sup>9</sup>. Self-kindness means that we are treating ourselves with kindness, care, understanding and support, just as we would treat a good friend, instead of engaging in self-judgement through saying harsh things to oneself (for example: “t’s all my fault, I am not good enough”) something we would never say to a friend. Instead of feeling isolated (“I am the only person going through this, there is something wrong with me”), we see our imperfections as part of the larger human experience and find common humanity through recognising that everyone suffers. Mindfulness helps us to break out of over identifying with what’s happening to us and how that makes us feel. Instead of suppressing or trying to avoid our feelings, we are encouraged

to be with our painful feelings as they are, without trying to change them or make them go away. Self-compassion involves being in a state of loving, connected presence as these aspects are corresponding to kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. If we meet ourselves, our lives, and others in that way, negative states are alleviated while positive states are generated, and we can access the emotional resources needed (Germer and Neff 2019)<sup>10</sup>.

We can additionally make a difference between tender and fierce self-compassion, with tender self-compassion encompassing ‘being’ with our pain in a tender way through comforting, reassuring, and validating ourselves, and fierce self-compassion encompassing ‘acting’ in the world in a fierce way through protecting, providing, and motivating ourselves. The informal practice of the self-compassion break includes all three components and can be applied whenever we find ourselves in a stressful situation in daily life.

<sup>8</sup> Germer, C. & Neff, K. (2018). *The mindful self-compassion workbook: A proven way to accept yourself, build inner strength, and thrive*. New York: Guilford Press, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Germer, C. & Neff, K. (2018). *The mindful self-compassion workbook: A proven way to accept yourself, build inner strength, and thrive*. New York: Guilford Press, 31-33.

<sup>10</sup> Germer, C. & Neff, K. (2019). *Teaching the Mindful Self-Compassion Program: A Guide for Professionals*. New York: Guilford Press, 164-166.

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## **Take a self-compassion break:**

*Think of a situation in your life that is challenging, that is causing you stress right now, such as a health problem, a problem in an important relationship, a work problem, or stress related to bias or discrimination. Please choose a specific problem in the mild to moderate range, not a big problem. You can check in with your body to know if you're in the right zone: safe, challenged or overwhelmed? We can't learn much if we're overwhelmed.*

### **Mindfulness**

*Please allow yourself to drop into the situation and recall how it feels or remember how you felt at the time. Notice how distress feels in your body. Now see if you can discover where in your body the sensation of stress is most evident, allowing your experience to be just as it is, perhaps making just a little more room than usual for the experience of discomfort in your body. Try labelling the experience for yourself in a gentle and kind way. You could say to yourself: "This is uncomfortable," "This hurts," "This is stressful," "This is a moment of suffering", validating your experience as you might do for a good friend.*

### **Common Humanity**

*Know that what you are experiencing right now is part of the human experience, and that you are not alone. Others would feel just as you do, or did, in the same situation. You could say to yourself: "Suffering is part of being human. We all struggle in our lives. Me too."*

### **Self-Kindness**

*See if you can respond to distress in a new way. Can you give yourself some kindness simply because you're having a moment of discomfort? Perhaps try placing a hand on the part of your body that feels stress the most and send kindness through your fingers into the part of your body that is holding stress for you, or gently massaging that part of your body.*

*Or ask yourself what you would most like to hear in a moment like this, perhaps words of comfort or support are just what you need to hear. For example, "I'm here for you," "I love you," and "You are a good person". And can you repeat those words to yourself, in your own mind, in your own way? See if you can find words for what you need in times like this. If you're having difficulty finding the right*

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*words, imagine that a dear friend or loved one is having the same problem as you. What would you say to this person? If your friend would leave with just a few words in mind, what would you like those words to be? What message would you like to deliver, heart to heart? Now see if you can offer the same message to yourself.*

*If you need more fierce self-compassion, options may include:*

- *May I be strong.*
- *May I be patient with myself.*
- *I'm right here.*
- *May I feel protected.*
- *I/We can do this.*

*If you need more tender self-compassion, options may include:*

- *May I accept myself as I am.*
- *May I learn to accept myself as I am.*
- *May I feel supported.*
- *May I forgive myself.*

*Take some time and offer yourself kindness in a way that feels just right for you, savouring soothing, supportive touch or words of kindness, not trying to make it go away just because you feel distress (Germer and Neff, 2018).<sup>11</sup>*

*Access a [free online audio version of the self-compassion break guided by the author.](#)*

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<sup>11</sup> Germer, C. & Neff, K. (2018). *The mindful self-compassion workbook: A proven way to accept yourself, build inner strength, and thrive.* New York: Guilford Press, 34-36.

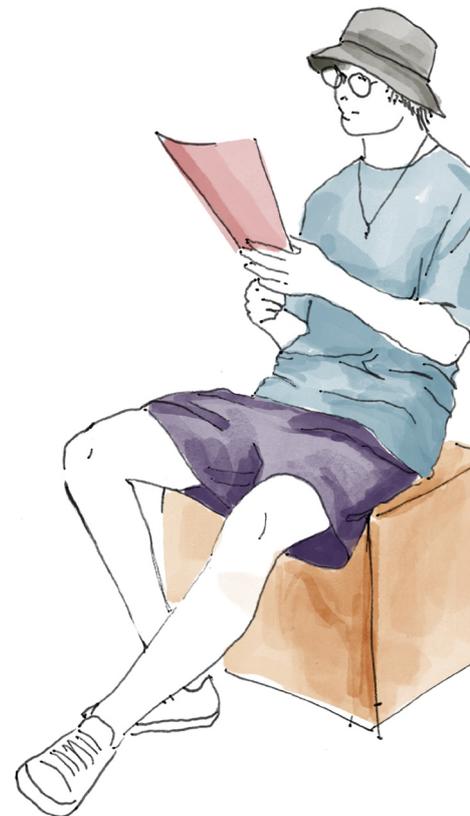
The training of mindful self-compassion implies a variety of practices, meditations and reflective exercises that are designed to help us cultivate the ability to respond kindly to ourselves and others. The evidence-based Mindful Self-Compassion 8-week programme developed by Dr. Kristin Neff at UT Austin and Dr. Chris Germer at Harvard Medical School includes modules on self-care in daily life, the practice of gratitude and self-appreciation, working with self-criticism, giving and receiving compassion, exploring our core values, compassionate listening, empathy fatigue, and being with challenging emotions and relationships. The course consists of eight sessions of three hours each and a four hour retreat, and is taught internationally in person and online by teachers trained by the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion (CMSC).

*The Center for Mindful Self-Compassion (CMSC) offers self-compassion training through various programmes for diverse populations, based upon scientific research and established teaching methods. CMSC is committed to building an equitable, inclusive, and caring global community supporting the practice of self-compassion where each person matters and everyone belongs. Its purpose is to alleviate human suffering and improve the collective well-being of the planet through the practice of self-compassion. Training is available in different formats, with specific offers for Teens, for Healthcare Communities, and for the LGBTQIAP2S+ community. Learn more and access free meditations and exercises at <https://centerformsc.org>.*

### **Common humanity: how one person's resilience affects our communities**

If we allow for mindfulness, common humanity and self-kindness to support us as we face challenges and live our lives, we can shift harmful ways of dealing with emotions such as anger, hatred and frustration. If we do not know how to handle anger in a non-harmful way, it will harden and grow in us and might even lead to a radicalisation in our hearts and attitude. If we work with others and they express their own grief, anger or sadness, we may experience empathetic stress resonating with them, feeling overwhelmed and unable to respond in a kind or supportive way. We need to become aware of our own condition first, and take care of our own needs and emotions to avoid tapping into a downward-spiral in our interactions with others. By learning to regulate our own negative emotions, we are able to respond more compassionately to other people's suffering and engage in prosocial behaviour. Therefore, emotional resilience is a highly relevant skill for people teaching or guiding others.

Research in neuroscience explains compassionate action as a process in which we must recognize our own distress and feel emotional resonance, and differentiate between what's ours and what's theirs before we can act on others' behalf to alleviate their distress and suffering (Well, T. 2019)<sup>13</sup>. It can be a challenge to know what to say or do when someone else expresses their pain to us, be it in person or online in a group discussion. When trying to support others, it is helpful to not offer advice or ideas on how to solve the problem (unless someone is asking for it), but to simply try to be open and present with them and be a compassionate listener.



<sup>13</sup> Well, T. (2019). Steps to Compassionate Action. Neuroscience explains why people don't always help. Psychology Today. Retrieved June 8, 2023 from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/the-clarity/201906/three-steps-compassionate-action>

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## How to support someone else who is suffering

- *Take care of yourself first, e.g take a self-compassion break.*
- *Be kind and supportive in the same way you expect others to be kind and supportive to you when you yourself are struggling.*
- *Remind yourself that you don't have to have all the answers and that your open, loving presence itself makes a difference.*
- *Let the other person know you care and that they are not alone.*
- *Reach out and offer a phone call, a text or message, asking something casual like „I've seen your posting, how are you?“*
- *Listen from a place of openness without interrupting the other person.*
- *Encourage the person to get help if appropriate.*

*More in-depth guidelines and resources are available at a variety of resources, for example with [Childline](#) or [YoungMinds](#).*

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As pointed out earlier, the Coordinators of the Understanding Europe Network emphasised during the workshop in Berlin that a common and strong support when feeling distressed is other people: friends, families and the network itself. At some point, each person was invited to imagine they were a tree with strong roots and branches that are free to reach out to others, forming a forest altogether. If we support ourselves through self-compassion, we feel strong and resourceful, and from that place we can connect with others and offer support. May your network continue to grow strong roots and build meaningful connections across Europe.

## Literature

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# Strengthening Democratic Resilience through Education

by Rasha Nagem, Markus Pausch

The assertion that democracy is in crisis has become a commonplace of public debate in Europe. While we have to differentiate between individual cases and states, we can assume that there is an overall growing threat of authoritarian and extremist phenomena. These are deliberately promoted by authoritarian populist parties on the one hand and violent extremist groups on the other. In some cases, populists or parties are closely networked with extremists. There are no simple solutions or recipes against these tendencies. What is clear is that strengthening democracy must take place on many levels, for example by combating structural inequality and exclusion, through democratic innovations and especially by strengthening the resilience of institutions and citizens. The latter is done through educational processes that take time.

The term resilience is defined by the American Psychological Association as follows: “Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences,

especially through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands ” (APA Dictionary of Psychology). “Democratic resilience” is understood differently from the perspective of political science, namely as the persistence of democratic institutions and practices (Boese et al. 2021). Practices refer to attitudes and behaviour towards democracy and towards the seductions of authoritarianism. In this short article, we do not focus on institutions, but on citizens and their resilience, which we understand not as adaptability, but as resistance to authoritarian and extremist phenomena. Democracies need democrats to function. Just as authoritarian regimes rely on raising uncritical subjects to those in power, it is the task and goal of democracies to educate critical and mature citizens. They need certain competencies and a basic knowledge of democracy.

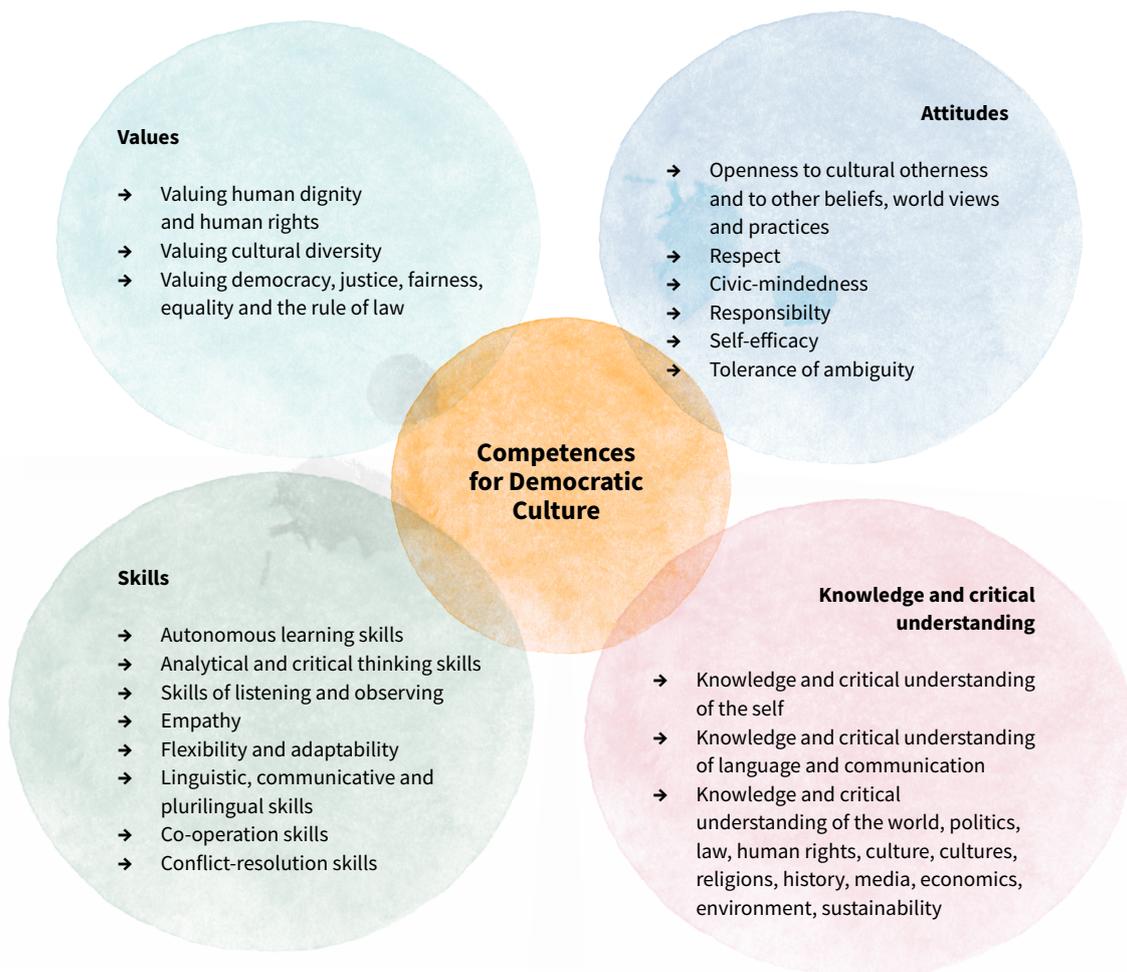
After World War II, there was a need in many countries, especially in Germany, to turn authoritarian socialised people into democrats. It is obvious that not

only institutional knowledge is needed for this. Citizenship education, which today is often also understood as democracy education, must promote competencies and enable citizens to exercise their democratic rights to respect basic democratic principles in their actions and to grant the same rights to other members of society. As simple as this sounds, it is difficult.

In 2016/2017, the Council of Europe developed a [reference framework](#) for a competence model that builds on much preliminary work of transdisciplinary cooperation. Citizenship education has become highly professionalised in recent decades. In addition to historians and political scientists, educationalists and didacticists have increasingly addressed the question of how to strengthen citizens' democratic competences. In the beginning, this was mostly about school subjects and teaching methods in traditional educational settings. Since then, it has become more differentiated. There is more and more talk of lifelong democracy learning and the spectrum of learning venues is broadening. No longer are only institutionally formalised educational institutions considered relevant, but also extracurricular youth work, adult education, associations or clubs. Even companies are increasingly seen as places for teaching competences for democracy. What may seem surprising at first glance is self-explanatory and consistent in polarised, politicised and conflict-ridden democracies. Today, we encounter politics on a daily basis, and if we understand it fundamentally as an organisational framework of our coexistence, it is quite consequential to think of the institutions of our everyday life beyond the school system.

In its Competence Framework for a Democratic Culture, the Council of Europe defines four categories that need to be taken into account. Values, Attitudes, Skills and Knowledge/Critical Understanding.

Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture

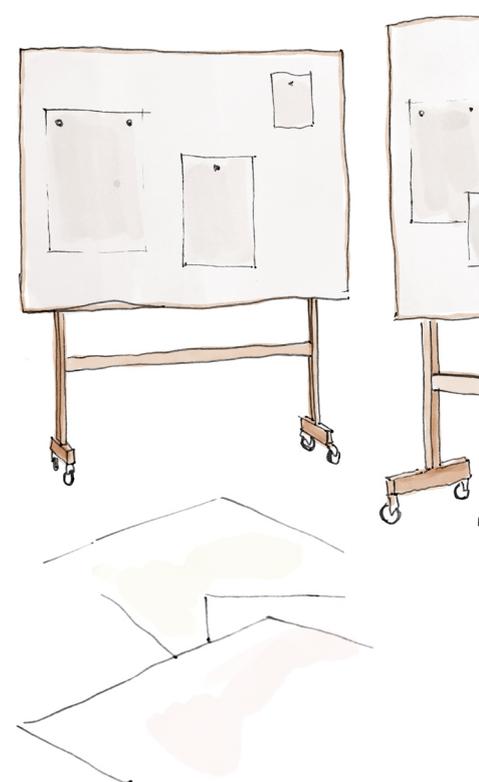


All those who work in the field of education and want to strengthen these four categories and the competences for a democratic culture should be aware that this is an ideal model<sup>1</sup>. It is not to be expected that there are people who have all these competences at their highest development. An ideal can usually never be 100% achieved, but it can be approached. The Competence Framework also makes it possible to focus on certain competences in the classroom. Today, for example, tolerance of ambiguity<sup>2</sup> – the individual’s ability to maintain composure and adaptability when faced with uncertain or ambiguous situations – seems to be an important attitude. This competence entails acknowledging the complexity of the world and being sceptical of simple solutions. It also allows one to better tolerate other perspectives and opinions. In times of polarisation, this helps to calibrate the heated political debate.

As part of our Resilience Through Education for Democratic Citizenship (REDE) project, we have written a manual describing methods that can be used outside of school classrooms and that are useful for different target groups. We present some of them in the following section.

### **Methods of Resilience against anti-democratic tendencies through education**

The primary objective of this manual is to establish a connection between the Framework of Competencies for a Democratic Culture and the practical context in which social workers and educators operate on a daily basis. Consequently, the Reference Framework is employed as a fundamental benchmark for the



<sup>1</sup> The Understanding Europe Network has adapted the Reference Framework and highlighted some of the competences for their work, see Educational Approach (and model of the flower) : <https://understanding.europe.org/en/education/educational-approach/>.

<sup>2</sup> Tolerance of ambiguity is one of the competences that the UE network highlights as an important attitude. It can be phrased as learning to be “comfortable in being uncomfortable”.

educational methods offered. These methods are categorized into three distinct groups, each comprising various scenarios. Each category enables, to a certain degree, the cultivation of at least one competence outlined in the model proposed by the Council of Europe. Furthermore, it is worth noting that these methods frequently encompass multiple competences, extending beyond the confines of a singular competence.

### **1. Methods to enhance general political awareness for an open society**

The cultivation of political awareness, encompassing an understanding of political structures, processes, and content, plays a crucial role in fostering an open society. The methods outlined in this category aim to achieve a primary objective: assisting individuals in recognizing their own roles within the political system and stimulating reflection on their personal political socialization. As detailed by Pausch et al. (2021), this process of self-reflection forms the fundamental basis for the

development of citizenship education and the acquisition of democratic competences. It's more than just targeting certain groups or engaging in social work, it's important for all members of a democratic society. Consequently, several methods have been developed to raise awareness and sensitize individuals, ultimately fostering political consciousness and citizen engagement.

### **2. Methods for reflecting on democratic competences with educators**

According to the authors of the handbook, democratic culture is not a static learning process, but an ongoing development necessitating continuous adaptation to new circumstances. Adjusting one's own professional moral in accordance with democratic principles requires engaging in (self-)reflection. Thus, the methods categorized herein have been chosen specifically to highlight the importance of self-reflection in allowing educators and facilitators to examine their own values, beliefs, and practices in the



context of a democratic culture. This encourages them to critically evaluate their approaches and finds ways to support learners more effectively in becoming active citizens. When teachers and youth/social workers find themselves in unsupportive conditions, (self-)reflection assumes an even greater importance. It allows educators to examine their role and influence within their specific educational settings, empowering them to discover ways of fostering a democratic culture despite potential constraints. This includes developing the competence and confidence (self-efficacy) needed to take the necessary actions to achieve desired goals and outcomes. As stated by Lenz et al. (2021), “Teachers and other educators exert a profound influence on learners as significant figures, role models, and facilitators of learning processes, extending beyond the mere transmission of knowledge. Educators can foster learners’ independence in critical thinking, cooperation, and confident participation in dialogue, discussions, and decision-making processes. They can contribute to the development of active citizens.”

### **3. Methods for strengthening resilience against anti-democratic phenomena**

Applying pedagogical methods to prevent anti-democratic phenomena is crucial for promoting civic education, developing critical thinking, fostering respect for diversity, building active citizens, strengthening democratic institutions, and addressing underlying societal issues. The outlined methods in this category concentrate on preventing anti-democratic phenomena, including extremism, authoritarianism, violent radicalization, hate speech, and conspiracy theories. These methods aspire to raise awareness of mechanisms such as discrimination, disinformation, and manipulation. By addressing these issues, the methods not only counter the adoption of extremist ideologies but also facilitate the development of competences outlined in the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture.

**Example of method:****Political awareness raising / understanding of the political self:**

The objective of political awareness training is to enhance individuals' comprehension of their own potential for influence, their political development and socialization, their societal roles, power dynamics, social injustices, and social structures.

This method aims to cultivate the awareness that individuals possess to varying degrees of power and influence across different facets of their lives, emphasizing that their power dynamics may differ from those of others in specific contexts. It prompts individuals to introspect on their conduct in such situations, the effects of these circumstances on them, and the strategies through which they can exert influence on both the immediate situations and the underlying structures. For instance, some individuals may have more power or influence than others in areas such as work, school, family, and leisure. This method encourages them to reflect on their actions within these situations, consider the impact these situations have on them, and explore how they can exert influence.

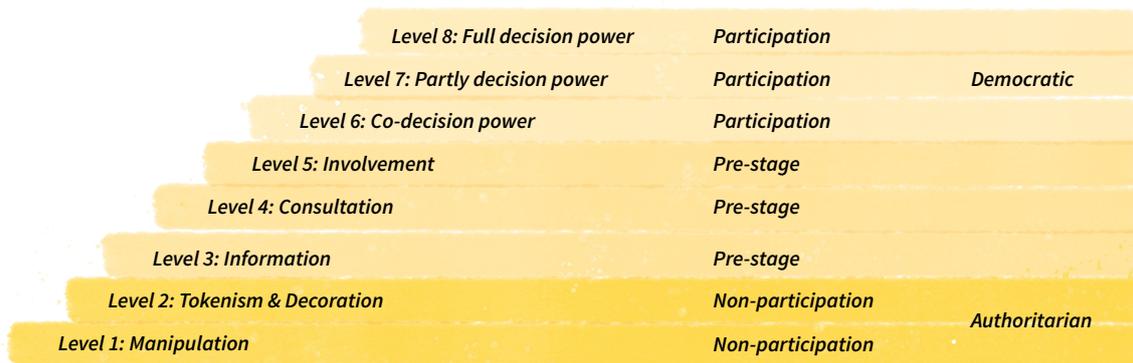
Additionally, political awareness training encourages individuals to think about their relationship with the state, their roles as citizens, and the complex connection between freedom and equality. By engaging in intentional reflection on these subjects, individuals can cultivate a more profound understanding of their own agency, the nuances of power dynamics, and the potential for fostering positive change within their societal context.

**Description of the method:**

Participants are initially invited to reflect on the following questions individually, followed by small group or plenary discussions<sup>3</sup>:

- *In which situations are you able to exert influence over your own life? (Several examples, such as work, education, family, and leisure, can be provided.)*
- *In which situations of your daily life do you feel self-sufficient and powerful?*
- *In which situations do you feel powerless? (Consider specific life situations in workplaces, schools, and other relevant contexts.)*

<sup>3</sup> One of the core pedagogical principles of the UE network is peer-education, which fosters the real-life and application-oriented approach (Lebensweltbezug) towards the (target) groups.



Graph: Ladder of participation (own, expended illustration according to Arnstein 1969)

To deepen the exercise, participants can be introduced to the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969) and asked to position themselves on the ladder with regard to various life situations, particularly within the context of their workplaces and/or schools.

Overview: In order to facilitate the application of these diverse methods, each of them provides a table presenting the name of the method, the target group, the duration, the spatial requirements, the competences, the objectives, the method description, the social work context, the preparation, the risks, the concept / application and the references.

In conclusion, the existing crisis of democracy presents significant challenges that demand a multifaceted approach towards strengthening democratic resilience. Notably, there has been a surge in the prevalence of authoritarian and extremist phenomena, actively propagated by populist parties, violent extremist factions, and their interlinked

networks. Effectively countering these tendencies requires a comprehensive strategy that encompasses measures targeting structural inequality, democratic innovations, as well as the enhancement of institutional and individual resilience. Education plays a pivotal role in strengthening democratic resilience. By equipping individuals with the necessary competences and fostering critical thinking, cooperation, and respect for diversity, education acts as a catalyst for active citizenship and the preservation of democratic values. Implementing the methods outlined in the REDE project manual, informed by the Council of Europe's Competence Framework, offers a practical approach to addressing the challenges faced by contemporary democracies and promoting a democratic culture for a more inclusive and resilient society

**Overview:**

Name of method	Political awareness / political self
Target group	Especially people with little political experience and knowledge
Duration	30 minutes to 1 hour
Spatial requirements	No spacial requirements
Competences	Self reflection, critical thinking
Objectives	Awareness raising about own political biography, socialisation and power relations
Method description	Individual experience between trainer and participant or group exercise with different variations
Social work context	Method is suitable for different contexts in social and youth work because it can be used in a very informal setting, in bilateral talks as well as in more formal settings like workshops or seminars, etc.
Preparation	Questions needed to be prepared in advance; Facilitators should first reflect about their own political self and also about their relation and influence on participants.
Risks	If people are only asked the questions without discussing them with the facilitator or in a group, they can feel left alone with their impressions and, for example, feel very powerless. Thus it is important to accompany the process and to discuss the results of the reflection.
Concept / application	Method used by M. Pausch during the study programme MA social Innovation and workshops for social workers and educators.
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# The Role of Resilience and Solidarity in Times of War

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## **Interview with network members**

### **Lisa from Ukraine and Davit from Armenia**

*Davit Manukyan is a youth worker and communications specialist from Yerevan, Armenia. He has been actively involved in the European Youth Parliament (EYP) for six years and serves as a board member in the national committee of EYP in Armenia. Davit has been involved in many youth projects including the Understanding Europe network in the capacities of Fellow, Coordinator and Peer Educator.*

*Yelyzaveta (Lisa) Glybchenko is the national coordinator of Understanding Europe - UKRAINE, and she has also been one of the 2022 "Thinking of Europe" fellows developing the workshop "Peace in Europe: digital and virtual reality peacebuilding". Lisa is an entrepreneur and a Ph.D. researcher of visual peace technologies.*

Lisa and Davit both have experienced, and are still experiencing war and its consequences daily, albeit in different ways. What does resilience mean to people under such circumstances? This is one of the guiding questions that we discussed with Lisa and Davit during an online interview. Davit (D) is a coordinator, former fellow (2021) and peer-educator of the Understanding Europe team in Armenia. Lisa (L) is a coordinator and former fellow (2022) of the Understanding Europe team in Ukraine. Lisa and Davit met in Berlin in May 2023 for the biannual Coordinators' Meeting and it was there that they talked about resilience for the first time with each other.

In the interview, they talk about their associations with the term resilience, its connection to their educational practice, and its relevance for democratic citizenship education in more general terms. The interview was conducted by Rebekka (R), former peer-educator and current project manager of Understanding Europe.

### **Disclaimer:**

*The interview deals with descriptions of injuries, death, and mental health in relation to war. In order to support our volunteers in difficult times, it is up to participants who are experiencing war or other difficult situations, to decide whether they want to attend and organise events of the network or not.*



**R:** *What does resilience mean to you? What do you associate with the word and (why) is it important to you?*

**D:** I think resilience is the capacity to handle difficult situations, not to give up and be able to recover in a timely manner. The first thing that comes to my mind when I hear the word resilience is my country (Armenia) and its people. The history of Armenia has always been very turbulent, many wars, natural catastrophes and of course genocide. Especially the past few years have been very hard and challenging and I admire the ability of my people to still continue living, developing and creating even in these very hard times. These days, another country that I associate with resilience is Ukraine due to the current aggression towards it, especially considering the destruction of the Kahkova Dam that happened a few weeks ago.

The current aggression towards Armenia and the de-facto republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) has been going on for quite a long time and we have constant shootings, loss of life and some level of fear in our every-day life. There is now a blockade in Artsakh, where 120,000 thousand people have been blocked by the Azerbaijani government for more than six months, leading to a humanitarian catastrophe. I think the people of Armenia still try to stay strong, we try to do the right thing and to continue our lives. We don't just give up and don't stop going forward, even though there are immense challenges. So that's what I associate with resilience and that's something to be very, very proud of.

**L:** When I think about resilience as a concept and as a practice, I tend to separate it into internal resilience and external resilience.

Internal resilience relates more to how you build up your own capacities as an individual in whatever way. External is not about circumstances necessarily, but about how you as an individual are using your internal resilience tools to interact with the outer world. And in that case specifically, my understanding of resilience is also embedded into what I do educationally and professionally, which is in the sphere of international relations, conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

What I have seen in the case of Russia's war against Ukraine is power relations that are designed to be against you as an Ukrainian on many levels. This is especially true for a young woman like myself. Using these power relations that are designed to be against you, you can transform them in a way where you empower yourself. I think Ukrainians are already using these moments of inflicted destruction of our country by Russia, in terms of infrastructure and in terms of social fabric, as a chance to rebuild better. Because we know that we are also in a postcolonial setting,<sup>1</sup> where a lot of things have to be undone

to become good things actually. So it's not only about grieving what has been taken away or what was destroyed. It's also about understanding that even though this happened we actually owe the people who died for us to live better and louder and do things in ways that we were previously not able to do. We actually owe them to go forward as much as we can. But of course, it's also still an ongoing work to make sure that the world knows and remembers that we have suffered in Ukraine and that we protect the people who protect us. So, this is how I understand resilience in these very context specific terms.

***R: You were talking about power relations and also your educational practice. Can you elaborate a little more on what is the connection between citizenship education and the education that you are doing in your workshops and the idea, concept and practice of resilience?***

**L:** My general approach to designing workshops on the different topics that I work on, is to help participants understand how many responsibilities

<sup>1</sup> The OSCE in it's Vancouver Declaration from 2023 has declared the Actions of the Russian Federation as "of imperial and colonial nature" against Ukraine. (see Vancouver Declaration June/July 2023: p.35).

they actually have in the very little actions they do, and how much change can happen from these little actions. Because we are not necessarily taught to see these things. What is the consequence of me visiting a certain online resource or what is the consequence of me transforming an image for example? But there are many consequences to that, that happen without you knowing that. But if you know about them you can design your initial action to have not only any impact, but to have exactly the impact that you want to have. My general belief, also with resilience, is that so much actually depends on you and if you just realise that and if you actually take responsibility and say “I am an active citizen”, then you are supposed to behave in a certain way.

***R: Davit, for you, based on your experience with citizenship education in Armenia, what kind of role does resilience play for you?***

**D:** We had the most active phase of the war in 2020<sup>2</sup>. In the postwar period , and also until now, things are happening that can be very demoralising and very hard, leaving you with a lack of motivation to act in any way. For example, in many cases I have struggled to do the basic stuff of my day. Like leaving my bed, eating something, or going out when I was in my worst condition. But resilience in this aspect is to continue doing all of the projects, all of the programmes, because you understand that people need it and you need to be resilient to make people around you, for example your team, resilient as well. In order to be able to continue working on the project, you need to be able and need to want to believe in the idea so much. It is important to



<sup>2</sup> The war in 2020 is also called the “44 Day War” or the “Second Nagorno-Karabakh War”. It lasted from 27 September to 10 November 2020.

continue going to schools, interacting with pupils, providing information and space to talk about democracy, and about values. In this aspect, resilience is to understand the importance of your actions, continuing with your usual activities even though you don't necessarily feel like doing those at all.

**R: So, it's both a tool and a practice somehow? You were talking about depressive episodes, of not being able to get out of bed – would say that resilience can help you get through that?**

**D:** Yes and no. I don't mean that resilience helps you to do that, so you don't do it because of resilience. But the fact that you are doing it, despite all the challenges, that is resilience in a way.

**R: Thanks. Lisa, do you want to add to this?**

**L:** Yes, something related to what Davit said. There is this kind of toxic talk about resilience: I often hear people talking about resilience in a very positive way,

as if it is something pretty, like lighting a candle that smells good and then your life is like a cloud of happiness. But actually, it is very difficult, dirty, and ugly, forcing yourself to do the simplest things. I think people need to understand that. Even if you have resilience, you are going to struggle and it's not going to look beautiful.

**D:** I would like to add a specific example. Last year in Understanding Europe and the European Youth Parliament (EYP) we were running a participation format. We had been preparing this event for quite a long time and the idea was to reach out to young people from remote regions. Right before the event, at the end of September 2022, there were huge clashes on the border with Armenia, some territories were occupied and the cousin of one of our main organisers of the event was unfortunately killed.

She was in a horrible condition, and we postponed the event for a month. Although she was still in a very emotionally challenging situation, she came to the event. She did everything



that she was expected to do, and even more, because of her motivation and resilience. Of course, we told her right from the start, that she would not have to do anything, but she still came, valuing how important the event would be for those kids. She was convinced that those young people from very remote regions have never participated in any type of project like this. They never were in such a setting before, they were never exposed to non-formal education. They had been in contact with us for the past months, telling how excited they are, that it could be really a life changing experience for them. Understanding and valuing this to an extent that would enable her to join despite these challenges – that is, I think, one definition of resilience.

***R: Why do you think solidarity in connection with resilience is important for you as a volunteer, for you as a coordinator within your team, but also within the entire Understanding Europe network? What does that mean for you and in how far is this supportive?***

**D:** I think as part of the network, you have a sense of belonging in a way. When something happens to you on a personal level or something bigger, and you talk about it, the solidarity of your peers can be very helpful and the opposite can actually be very painful and in a way destructive. The solidarity of the team or the network helps you feel that you are not alone and that there are people who care. That gives you some hope and positive energy to go through what you are going through at that stage.

**L:** When I was thinking about teams, a few different kinds of groups and network situations came to mind. The first one is that



I have been working a lot already with Ukrainian people who were displaced and came to Finland. After the beginning of the full-scale invasion, I had this regular digital art for peace meeting for them here in Finland. It has been really helpful for me as well as for them, they told me in their feedback. It's important to me that we have an island of Ukrainianness in this environment, which is new for them. I think it is so important because you can practise your full identity or as full as possible, even if you are abroad. This is very good for your resilience, because it highlights the difference between you and your environment in a productive way. It also helps you put your thoughts in order, when you are confused about where you are in life and what happened to you. As I am originally from Crimea, I have lost access to my home already in 2014, when the war started. I have kind of walked the journey before, and was able to support people who were new to this situation.

I started being a coordinator with Understanding Europe only earlier this year. When I was asked to take over this position, I thought "I am so overworked on the one hand. I don't think I can take this opportunity that comes with the responsibility of organising with and for other people". But at the same time, I was convinced that it was so important to have an Ukrainian team in the network of Understanding Europe. The project is trying to rethink and build European values differently and I think that it is really important that a Ukrainian team is contributing to that. I think we can add an important perspective on Europeanness to the network because we think about it now in a very different way.

**3** In the flower of competence (Council of Europe) critical thinking is one of the skills Understanding Europe is trying to foster with the educational approach within all the activities.

**R: What kind of competences do we need to strengthen to build a more just and democratic society?**

**D:** I think the first thing that actually came to my mind was critical thinking. I think that's a skill that is very important to have in order to succeed in democratic citizenship education<sup>3</sup>. Another thing that came to my mind is openness. Armenian society can be quite liberal in some respects but quite restrictive, traditional and conservative in others. While this is not always bad, it hinders progress and development in many aspects of life. And if that could be tackled, I think it could benefit the dialogue within the country.

**R: You said critical thinking as a first competence. What exactly do you mean by that?**

**D:** Having the ability to analyse all of the information that you are getting. In the 21st century, there is an endless flow of information, and everything is so chaotic that it's sometimes hard to grasp and understand what's going on, what is the right thing to do, how

to act, what to believe in? If you have critical thinking, this makes navigating through that chaos much easier.

**R: I associate critical thinking also with being aware of power structures. Would you agree?**

**D:** Yeah, of course. I think it is both, being accountable for your actions and beliefs, but also holding others, including power structures, accountable. Again, from my experience, when we are talking about Europe in general, I think that powerful people and institutions in Europe, and also in the EU, don't always practise what they preach. If they are held accountable, that could change.

**R: My last question concerns solidarity in the network: Do you have moments in mind, where you experienced a sense of belonging and solidarity? What do we need to show more solidarity with each other, what would you like to be different? Or just really, broadly speaking: is the network a place of solidarity for you?**



**D:** I think that sometimes the network is too EU-centric. As Armenia is not part of the EU, we can feel left out sometimes. The interest of network members sometimes seems to be depending on where something is happening – and I felt that on several occasions. But there is also the other way around: I'm very good friends with many people from the network. Many of them reached out to me in difficult situations and asked how I am, how they can help me; and that really makes me feel good. Also, last year, when there was the short war in September, Understanding Europe opened the #updates-from-europe Slack Channel, where we were able to share information with network members, which was also a very nice gesture.

I can give another concrete example. When the big 44-day war was happening in Armenia back in 2020, where approximately 5000 young people died between the ages of 18 to 20, we initiated a petition. Network members from all over Understanding Europe and EYP networks joined. We created

letters in many different languages and sent them to parliamentary representatives, to the European Parliament, to national parliaments, asking politicians to get involved in the topic, to speak up, and to do everything in their power to stop the war. On the contrary, other things have also been happening, which I don't really understand, for example that the Schwarzkopf Foundation did not give a statement on the war in 2020.

**L:** When I was a fellow last year, I felt really supported. The fellowship started just a few days after the beginning of the full-scale invasion. I was approached and offered help even before I came to Berlin. The people who were running that meeting were constantly checking on me – in very thoughtful and sensitive ways, not making this about victimhood, but rather empowering me. So that's how I felt during the fellowship. But now, I see things a little bit differently. Overall, I feel a drop of interest in the experiences of Ukrainians in general and also the experiences of Ukrainians within the network. That's not a good



thing because challenges persist and new challenges arise, which also have consequences for how our national chapter can continue or can relaunch itself at some point. Nobody has the right to be tired of the war. We rely on help and nuanced understanding of our situation to continue to be part of the network and the interest needs to come back. And compassion also needs to come back.

***R: We have heard that practices of solidarity and supporting each other in the network can look very different. And network members also deal with incisive experiences such as war very differently. What would you like other network members to know and to keep in mind in these challenging times?***

**D:** That no matter how far or close the conflicts are, human rights should be universal and our approach towards those should not be dependent on distance or any other factors.

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