



CITY OF LUBLIN

Official opening of the "European Youth Capital" celebrations, at the Academic Culture and Media Center, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin

CITY OF YOUTH

Lublin is the first Polish city to have been chosen as the "European Youth Capital" (in 2023). Awarded by the European Youth Forum, the title aims to bolster the position of young people, promote their participation in social life, and strengthen the European identity.

Iwona Hofman

Institute of Social Communication
and Media Studies
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University
in Lublin, Poland

At the start of this century, the eminent Italian philosopher Francesco Cataluccio made the following diagnosis: “It is already clear that the twentieth century was also a century in which immaturity tragically triumphed; in short, it was the age of Peter Pan. The cult of youth took on a different, more radical form: adults began to crave to maintain their youth, to think youthfully, to act and dress like young people. The child was chosen as the model of the ideal being,” (*Immaturità: La malattia del nostro tempo*, Einaudi 2004). His notions certainly ring true when one observes, for instance, current fashion trends, animated advertisements employing childhood symbols, and the fascination with manga culture. However, one might not agree with the implications of Cataluccio’s statement. Why does he fear immaturity’s “tragic triumph,” instead of being intrigued by the value of the youthful state of mind, which can be described in terms of enthusiasm, spontaneity, intuitive discernment of good and evil, community, fidelity to ideals, and a sense of agency?

It is said that even the ancients complained about the young people of their day. In Polish literature, the clash between the Classicists and the Romantics had generational roots. The most famous poetic glorification of youth in all of Polish literature – Adam Mickiewicz’s “Ode to Youth” – contains a list of slogans that sound very contemporary today (even though they date back to the nineteenth century):

“No Heart, no Spirit – Lo! cadaverous crowds!
O Youth! Pass me thy wings,
And let me o’er the dead earth soar;
Let me vanish in delusion’s clouds,
Where many the Zeal begets a wonder
And grows a flower of novelty up yonder,
Adorned in Hope’s enamellings.”
(trans. J. Zawadzki).

I would venture to suggest a non-traditional interpretation of the “Ode...” – highlighting its themes of civic vigor, agency, and community.

In today’s media-saturated world, discussions about youth are often influenced by quite far-off frameworks and perceptions. On the one hand, the cult of youth, particularly in terms of physical appear-

ance, has captured the minds of millions (through fashion, mimicked behavior aesthetic medicine, and infantilization). On the other, the natural order has been disrupted; where parental experiences once formed the basis of intergenerational understanding, today it is children who often guide functional choices, such as selecting phones and apps. Furthermore, young adults are staying in their family homes longer (perhaps too long), driven by convenience or perhaps by fear and uncertainty. From a timeless perspective, it must be acknowledged that youth is inherently linked to an optimistic stance on life and the sense that anything is possible.

Impossible? Done!

In 2023, Lublin became the first city in Poland to be awarded the title of “European Youth Capital.” This initiative was spearheaded by young residents of Lublin, inspired by the Sempre a Frente Foundation, an NGO set up and run by twenty-somethings. The city’s bid for the title had strong arguments: over 30% of its residents are young people up to 30 years old, the number of high school students has been increasing (from 27,500 in the 2018/2019 school year to 30,000 in 2022/2023), and academia plays a crucial role in Lublin’s image (with 9 universities, over 200 fields of study, and nearly 59,000 students in the 2022/2023 academic year – including nearly 8,800 from abroad, representing over 110 countries, giving it a 15% internationalization rate), along with a concrete youth policy.

As the application for the “European Youth Capital” competition was being prepared, however, the pandemic broke out and war began in Ukraine. Nevertheless, these two tough challenges did not diminish the faith of Lublin’s residents and city authorities that



Prof. Iwona Hofman

A media scholar and political scientist. Her research focuses include qualitative journalism and the Paris-based journal *Kultura*. She is Director of the Institute of Social Communication and Media Studies at UMCS, President of the Polish Society of Social Communication, chair of the Committee on Social Communication Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and chair of the Council on Scientific Societies of the PAS Presidium. She is also a member of the Council for Scientific Excellence.
iwona.hofman@mail.umcs.pl

Inauguration of the
“European Youth Capital”
program at the Cultural
Center in Lublin



CITY OF LUBLIN

continuing their efforts made great sense. Volunteerism flourished on a large scale, driven by the positive energy of youth. Information technologies streamlined the management of the preparation stages. The Sempre a Frente Foundation argued explicitly: we young people are not visible enough in our city, even though we contribute greatly to defining Lublin as a city of youth. In the justification for awarding the “European Youth Capital” title, the European Youth Forum highlighted the city’s openness and accessibility, its readiness to support the needs, ideas, and dreams of young people from all over Poland and Europe. Intergenerational and intercultural dialogue and meeting spaces were strengths of the city’s candidacy. The #GetToKnowUs campaign was particularly successful as a way to survey young people’s needs and expectations regarding a friendly city – as envisioned by Lublin’s leaders.

What did we do?

On 16 March 2023, there was a widespread mobilization of Lublin residents and youth who believed in the potential for change. At the inauguration of the city’s year as the European Youth Capital, Lublin’s Mayor Krzysztof Żuk declared “The energy and enthusiasm of young people are essential for the harmonious development of the city, taking the well-being of many different social groups into account.” Following this, a truly grand event unfolded: 1,000 initiatives in culture, sports, and education were implemented, with 10 million PLN allocated for youth initiatives, 2.3 million PLN for youth spaces, and through the Children’s Assistance Center in Lublin, 200 hours of psychological help provided, 1,800 hours of individual psychological support for children, and 1,500 first-contact calls received. Programs such as “Entre-

preneurial Kids,” “Entrepreneurial Youth,” “Student of the Future,” “Check IT,” “Lublin Skills Up!,” and “Skills for Tomorrow” facilitated 400 workshops in collaboration with 300 partners, engaging 9,000 participants.

Under the “City of Culture” program, young people executed 97 projects for over 1.5 million PLN, while the “City District of Culture” program saw 28 projects spending over 500,000 PLN, and “Youth Inspires City Districts” led to 69 district initiatives worth 300,000 PLN. Additionally, a new category of cultural scholarships for young people over the age of 13 was introduced. Young people also launched eight new meeting places with evocative names like “Baza,” “ReWir,” “Simply a Cool Place,” and “Culture Point.” These venues attracted around 10,000 visitors, and the city authorities allocated 2.3 million PLN for their development.

Numerical data, no matter how impressive, cannot fully capture the impact of the European Youth Capital project – they simply fail to convey the atmosphere of joy and relaxation that accompanied the festivals, discussions, exhibitions, and meetings with authors. For instance, the Festival of Young Poetry at the Józef Czechowicz Literature Museum and poetry slams held in the spaces of Lublin’s Old Town were unique opportunities to discover the wordsmithery and sensitivity of young creators and their audiences. Listening to youthful voices quickly challenges stereotypes. Poets access a world inaccessible to most of us, discussing the significance of friendship, collaboration, and the need to seek meaning beyond the rote repetition of practices familiar to us from home or school.

Much of the credit for this is due to the Heuresis Foundation (also youth-led), which presents the issues of young people in artistic forms, such as during the “Capital of the Polish Language” cultural festival in Szczepieszyn (where the European Youth Capital had its showcase in August 2023). What kind of language do we use to communicate across generations, and how do young people depict the world? Fostering reflection on this question is an intangible impact of the European Youth Capital, but one that is socially and culturally salient.

Added value

Efforts to bring the city’s youth policy more in line with the priorities of young residents in Lublin have streamlined the work of the Lublin Youth City Council (operating since 2005), the Lublin Student Council (established in 2021), and expanded cooperation on municipal committees. Participatory School Budgets have been introduced, allowing school students to have a say in how their own needs should be addressed – for instance, by designing educational and relax-

Outdoor workshop in Lublin



ation spaces, purchasing plants and animals, buying books for libraries, and creating a mini bicycle town. The systemic framework of Lublin's youth policy further includes the initiatives "City Academy," based on civic education, "City Youth Activator," providing microgrants for social and civic activities, and "Lublin Volunteerism," which harnesses the extraordinary experiences of the European Youth Capital as a model of shared responsibility. These best practices can be adopted by many cities as a proven model for involving youth in city management.

History, tradition, diversity, and multiculturalism have shaped the character of the European Youth Capital event in Lublin, as evidenced by various international projects. Over 600 participants from 13 countries took part in the 2023 Cross-Border Cooperation Congress "City of Youth," the European Youth Forum was held, and there were study visits and youth exchanges under projects like "Youth for the City, City for Youth," "Education Means Relationships," "In Search of Common History," and "Memory of the West, Memory of the East." Notably, the first of these projects connected local communities in Poland, Ukraine, and Norway, creating the youth space "Hey!" It also included 37 Participatory School Budget projects and activities of the Lublin Youth Information and Development Center.

The significant presence of Ukrainian and Belarusian youth, taking refuge in Lublin, is also worth highlighting. International and intercultural integration is promoted through city games, museum lessons, and guided city tours, encapsulated by the slogan: "Discover Lublin – be inspired by the history of our city!" One of the major added values is the redefinition of Lublin's mission, which now states: "It is important that in the coming years, the voice of young people will be even more heard in the city, that young people will be at the center of thinking about Lublin as a good place to live (...) the needs of young people and their voices should become more central to the city's actions." As a lasting and symbolic expression of the continuity of the European Youth Capital idea, one of the streets in Lublin has been renamed the Avenue of the European Youth Capital Lublin 2023.

Good scientific practices

Since 2013, the Forum of Young Media Scholars and Communication Specialists has been operating within the structure of the Polish Society of Social Communication. The forum brings together academic youth, including university undergraduates and doctoral candidates seeking additional opportunities for education and research. The forum is unique among scientific societies, and its focus on young researchers has yielded more than promising



CITY OF LUBLIN

results. It is with great satisfaction that I have been observing the development of such initiatives as its mentoring program (which involves consultations and guidance from experienced researchers outside their home university), the journal *Com.press*, edited by young researchers and primarily open to their work, as well as seminars and webinars.

The forum's activities address questions about how to encourage young people to study and pursue scientific work. These are important questions, especially given the frequent shortage of candidates for research positions and a decline in the social scientific movement. Universities and scientific societies are becoming less attractive places for young people to pursue their careers for practical reasons (low salaries, lack of time for social activities, and sometimes rigid forms of operation). Therefore, every initiative proposed by young people should be discussed and undertaken with the hope that it will help bring about an authentic exchange of experiences between generations.

In managing our academic departments, institutes, societies, and scientific committees, we should endeavor to create opportunities for such cooperation. Let us strive to convey our own passions to those who will come after us, imparting a contemporary dimension to the role of the academic mentor – as a partner in the pursuit of truth and a guiding light on the path to scientific advancement.

Photos courtesy of the Office of the Mayor of Lublin.

The multimedia event
Lublin is YOUth

Further reading:
compress.edu.pl
lublin.eu/lublin/esm2023
www.youthforum.org