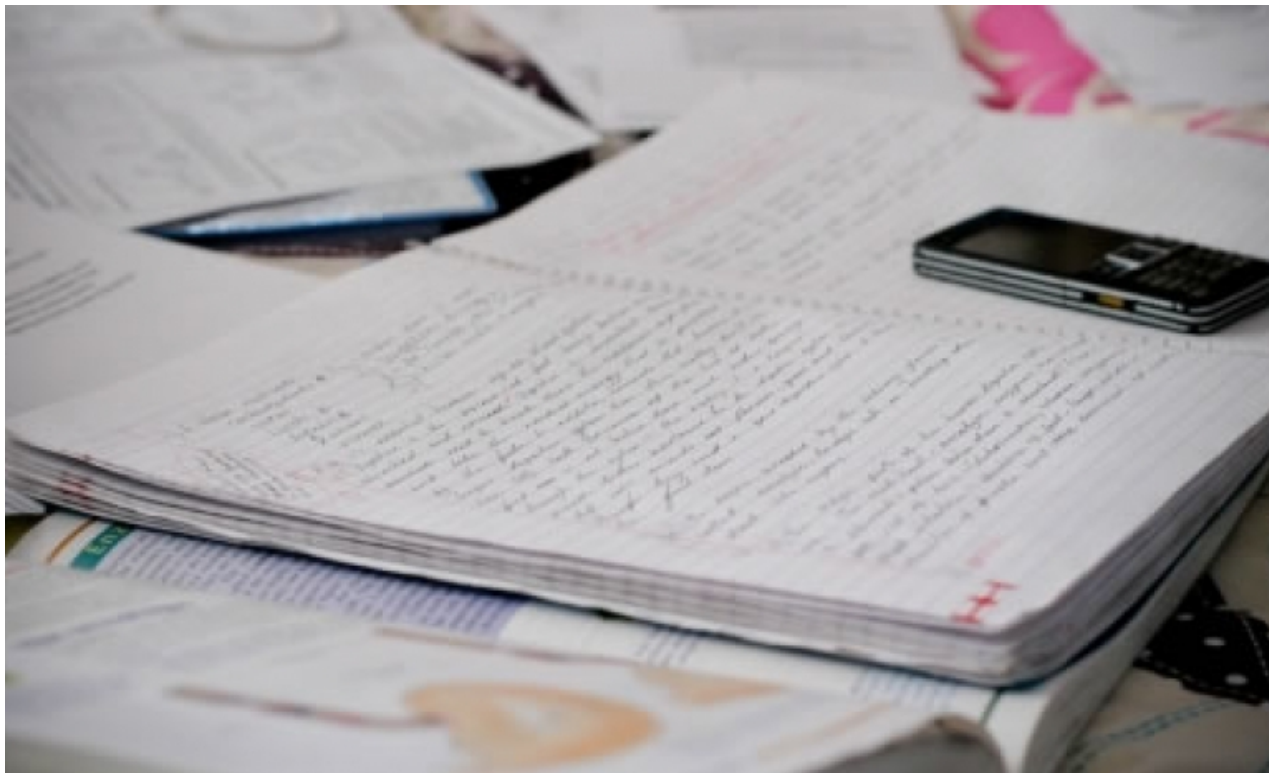


## Present challenges of the voluntary sector in Europe



11/10/2016 - 12:12



Volonteurope held its 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference in Nantes, focusing on the theme of “Apathy or Action: Young Europeans Take a Stand”.

### Piotr Sadowski

Submitted by F Pere Tarrés on Thu, 11/10/2016 - 11:52

**Description:**

Secretary General of [Volonteurope](#), a European civil society network promoting volunteering, active citizenship and social justice. An economist by degree, he has extensive experience in volunteering and social justice advocacy across Europe, citizen engagement and empowerment, and combating all forms of discrimination.

**Vertical photo:**



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We were joined by dozens of young volunteers and activists who are involved, on a daily basis, in social action and volunteering in their own countries. They see their engagement through volunteering as important **pathways to empowerment, confidence, employability and a feeling of inclusion**, particularly at a time when Europe and communities across Member States often feel very divided and face challenging times ahead.

In June, 52% of the voting public in the UK cast their vote for Brexit and decided that the country is to leave the European Union, although, as we hear the news on 3 November 2016, the UK High Court has ruled that the Parliament must vote on whether the country can start the process of leaving. Unless overturned, this means that the Government cannot trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty – beginning formal exit negotiations with the EU – on its own. Political commentators are already saying **this is the most important constitutional court case in decades** and the results could cause a “nightmare scenario for the Government”. The Prime Minister, Theresa May, was planning to start Brexit negotiations before the end of March 2017, but the ruling will now seriously derail the timetable.

**Young voters in the UK were overwhelmingly pro staying in the EU** and so were clearly angry after the result was announced. They felt betrayed by the older generation who are leaving them a legacy they did not want. At the same time as Brexit happened and its consequences we are yet to see, we have seen a rise in populism and extreme right wing parties across Europe. These are what I see as some of the biggest challenges to the future of the EU. At the same time, I see volunteering and engagement, particularly amongst young people, as something that can help save the European project, because, if ever we have needed **community cohesion and capacity which encourages people to look out for each other**, it is now. I see volunteering and social action as something that will continue to bring communities across Europe together, not just European citizens, but also refugees and asylum-seekers that have fled war, persecution and violations of their rights as human beings. I believe that volunteering and social action can help heal divisions in communities and between generations.

[Our recent conference in Nantes](#) was certainly a testimony to this, as we challenged young people to get involved around whatever their personal interests are. We had young people from across Europe running workshops about things that concern them: LGBT rights, discrimination and homophobia, sexual and reproductive rights, homelessness, environment and well-being, the refugee crisis, domestic violence. In all of these, **volunteering and social action are powerful mechanisms to overcome challenges and divisions**.

Engagement through volunteering, in people of all ages, but especially in youth, is very empowering, as I know very well from the work that [Volonteurope](#) and its member organisations, as well as our partners, do, across Europe. Youth civic engagement can contribute to personal development of young people, to promote their welfare and to challenge injustice in society. Political change happens when people see their shared interests and work together on common goals and objectives. However, such participation **needs to be meaningful, so that young people have the real possibility of influencing institutions and decisions** – both of which are still very inflexible and slow to react to the new forms of youth volunteering and engagement (including digital). Here, there is still a lot of work to be done in our countries and at European level.

The conference in Nantes left us with three key things, which I think bode well for the future of volunteering, especially amongst young people, in Europe. Firstly, there is so much **engagement and enthusiasm** (not apathy!) of young volunteers across so many topics, who are involved in social impact work that requires empathy, understanding and commitment. Secondly, I feel that there is a strong **awareness that volunteering and social action can empower young people**, give them confidence and ensure their voices are heard. And thirdly, that there is a big need for better dialogue and engagement with young volunteers, especially by **institutions and policy-makers**, and more understanding of how young people want to engage. Beware: this quite likely might not be in traditional ways, but through social media or around causes, as well as grassroots mobilisation.

We will shortly be launching our **final report** on apathy or action amongst young Europeans, a draft of which we debated in Nantes, so do check [our website](#) in December. In the meantime, I'd like to echo what our President, [Oonagh Aitken](#), said at the end of our event in Nantes, which I think is so appropriate for seeing the future of volunteering in Europe in a positive light: “multiply your social and volunteering actions, and **be the change you want to see!**”

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