

ALLIANZ FOUNDATION

Risktaker Pulse

How Social Movement Leaders Fight for a Better Future

Executive Summary

Across Europe, social movements are fighting against social injustice and global warming. Many seek to push government officials, industry leaders and the public to do more to counter the systemic problems of our time. Prominent examples include Fridays for Future and Black Lives Matter. In recent years, these and other movements have shown that a promising way to support social change is to help the movements and the individuals within them. The Allianz Foundation refers to these individuals as **risktakers**, people who actively fight for social justice, open societies or a livable planet.

Risktakers do not act alone. They are deeply embedded within non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social businesses, civically engaged law firms and other formal entities that actively support a given movement. Risktakers think and act outside normal channels, beyond election cycles, and often in the face of adversity or even open hostility. Their views, visions and experiences can serve as a valuable resource in today's age of perpetual instability. This first edition of the Allianz Foundation Risktaker Pulse has captured many of these insights and offers readers a deeper understanding of what it takes to drive social transformation.

The report at hand is based on more than 75 hours of interviews with 59 risktakers in five European countries, namely Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom. The interviewees represent 59 organizations that strive to empower socially marginalized groups (25%), promote resilient and open democracies (25%), combat climate change (10%) or work on a combination of these and other pressing issues (40%).

The interviews were conducted between March and June 2022—a period that was marked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Despite apparent differences between the five aforementioned countries and their societies, the research revealed some distinct pan-European patterns.

Present and Future Risks Facing the Five European Societies

The consensus among the interviewed risktakers is that the three major challenges their societies are facing today are also the most pressing risks for the future: social polarization, structural discrimination and open racism, and Russia's war in Ukraine. In addition, climate change was mentioned as an important catalyst that exacerbates these risks.

- Risktakers in all five countries say that growing **social polarization** is the biggest threat to democracies across Europe. Many fear that the ongoing erosion of trust and solidarity within and between European societies will accelerate the rise of populist political leaders and lead to an assault on civic freedoms—as seen in the recent attacks on the independence of the courts in Poland. Risktakers in the climate field warn that climate change could lead to further division, especially as regards the question of who is to pay for Europe's planned transition to a low-carbon economy.
- Risktakers warn that **structural discrimination and open racism** toward migrants, LGBTQ+ and other marginalized groups stoke social division. They see controversial debates around this issue potentially contributing to creating deeper social splits based on identity and race. Here too, climate change could exacerbate the aforementioned risks as it may increase the number of people forced to flee to Europe, some risktakers warn.

See full report at allianzfoundation.org/study.

- Risktakers are concerned about the repercussions of **Russia's war in Ukraine**. Every one of them has felt the effects of the war and most have chosen to help in whatever capacity they can, for example, by relocating refugees or helping the victims of rape and sexual violence. Several see the war as a harbinger of future risks, including the possibility of armed conflicts in other European countries.

Sharing Knowledge for Social Change

In their efforts to fight for social justice, open societies or a livable planet, the interviewed risktakers shared four key lessons learned that could prove invaluable to others like them:

- **Unleash the power of networks**
Russia's war in Ukraine shows how partnerships within and across countries can exponentially increase the effectiveness of each participant and the network as a whole. For example, one risktaker leveraged her network of partners in Poland and Ukraine to get unaccompanied minors to safety. Another one promotes the work of like-minded partners in the climate field, aiming to increase their visibility and impact. The appeal of such collaborative efforts notwithstanding, risktakers stress that building and maintaining partnerships is challenging and time-consuming.
- **Tell a compelling narrative, also in collaboration with artists and creative minds**
Risktakers stress the importance of telling a clear and accessible story about who they are and what they want to achieve. Many see great potential in teaming up with artists and creative minds, who are often risktakers in their own right. Together, they hope to craft new narratives that can break through the noise of social media and the 24-hour news cycle and to share them with new groups of people. One example is the project called "The Walk," which saw volunteers walking Amal, a giant puppet of a Syrian refugee girl more than 8,000 kilometers across 11 countries to draw attention to the needs of young refugees.
- **Fight misinformation and disinformation**
Politicians can and do distribute inaccurate information either by mistake (misinformation) or by design (disinformation). When the media accepts it—again, either by mistake or by design—the spread of information becomes a cascade of inaccuracies that leads to a misinformed public. Risktakers therefore stress the importance of fighting misinformation and disinformation by (1) building strong relationships with media outlets and media personalities, (2) using social media strategically and (3) liaising more directly with government officials, including at the EU level.
- **Diversify systems of funding**
To improve their organizations' financial bottom line and flexibility, risktakers look beyond public and philanthropic funding. Several find that the larger social movement ecosystem can offer quick and unbureaucratic access to much-needed resources. Numerous organizations have already begun to share some of their resources, especially with partners who work more closely with certain communities or issues. However, while such efforts are described as fruitful, much of the regranted money continues to originate from public and philanthropic sources, whose funding rules often prevent such redistribution.

The experiences and views of risktakers can serve as an inspiration for more than just the next generation of activists and social movement leaders. They should also encourage a conversation among funders about who they support, why and how their funding can amplify the voices of those who are fighting for a better future for Europe's next generations.

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