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**PARTICIPATION ERASMUS ALUMNI
FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Erasmus+ for Civic Engagement

Studies, results, ideas and proposals from the European alumni network involved in the long-term European PEACE project on active participation

AGENZIA NAZIONALE

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PEACE web pages: <https://www.erasmusplus.it/iniziativa/peace-long-term-activity/peace-participation-erasmus-alumni-for-civic-engagement/>



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PEACE IN A NUTSHELL

PEACE – «Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement» is a Long Term cooperation activity focused on increasing civic, political participation among EU citizens.

Coordinated by Italian Erasmus+ National Agency INDIRE (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research).

Establishment of a structured network of institutional, economic and in education actors that support the enhancement of the “Erasmus+ Experience” for Civic Engagement.

ACTIONS

Transnational seminars, Focus groups, Research activities, Didactic modules, on Civic Engagement, Deliberative tables, “Erasmus goes to town” (Erasmus+ stories and experiences into schools, education centers, associations and universities).

TARGET GROUPS

Teachers and educational leaders in schools, universities and adult education centres;

Alumni and Role models Alumni of the European Programs (Erasmus+).

FOCUS ON DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Strengthening active citizenship and awareness of European values for young people;

Reinforcing networks and links with territories, strengthening active citizenship and awareness of European values for young people;

Promoting synergies among Erasmus+ Alumni and Ambassadors networks all over Europe;

Enhancing Erasmus+ Mobility experiences contribution to Civic engagement and European identity;

Spreading knowledge about Erasmus+ opportunities and encouraging participation of new beneficiaries.



INTRODUCTION

More civic engagement and valorization of differences in Erasmus+ to counter young people's distrust and aversion of democratic politics

By **Matteo Minà**

December 2024. Civic engagement must increasingly be at the center of the **Erasmus+** Program, mapping out its future. Furthermore, differences in Europe enrich the Union, but they need to be transparent, publicly discussed, and valorized; if not, they may be a basis for enduring conflict and sense of exclusion. Finally, the lack of youth representation in EU institutions risks to encourage feelings of lack of representation and hence a turning away from EU institutions.

These three macro themes are the ones that emerge forcefully from the first three years of work (2022-2024) of the transnational **PEACE** project, the long-term activity (LTA-Long Term Activities) coordinated by the **Erasmus+ National Agency INDIRE** and focused on one of the European priorities that cut across the entire Program: **civic participation**. Up to today, the project has organized nine events in Europe, with the participation of over a thousand people of 23 nationalities, including alumni and ambassadors.

The PEACE project, an acronym for Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement, was born in 2022 from an idea of the INDIRE Agency and has as partners the Erasmus+ National Agencies of France, Spain, Luxembourg, Germany, Belgium, Romania, Portugal, Sweden, Latvia, Ireland and the Czech Republic. Starting from 2025, other countries will join PEACE, for a second and broader phase of the project until 2027.

The idea behind PEACE is to strengthen the sense of belonging to the European Union, raise awareness of the active role of citizenship, foster synergies between the networks of Erasmus+ Alumni, Ambassadors and Role Models in all sectors of the Programme (Higher Education, School Education, Adult Education, Training), to build an organised and widespread network, capable of involving all stakeholders and encouraging the inclusive approach, starting from the territories, to spread and improve knowledge of the opportunities offered by the Programme and encourage the participation of new beneficiaries.

Specifically, one of the main objectives of PEACE is to discuss and debate, explore and develop the civic and political dimension (but also related ones such as political engagement and activism, critical thinking and political knowledge of the EU) and to propose a series of innovative ideas on how civic and political engagement can be stimulated.

Thus, the PEACE project not only contributes to a more robust development of civic and political education within the Programme, but also engages in more intensive reflection and debate, as well as analysis of crucial political issues within it, namely in relation to inclusion and diversity. These include, among others, issues of gender bias in Erasmus+ and the relationship of the Programme with forms of gender inequality.

In order to give strength, substance and scientific evidence to the project on civic engagement, which involved several European cities, including some in Italy, a group of university researchers coordinated by **Paul Blokker**, Professor of Political Sociology at the **University of Bologna**, has been created. In the first three years of work, four final reports were produced, edited by Professor Blokker himself, following the international seminars in Naples (December 2022), Malmö (Sweden, October 2023), Seville (Spain, April 2024) and Lisbon (Portugal, November 2024). These documents are, in chronological order, below in this document.

In the above mentioned reports, it is first explained what is meant by Civic and political engagement, why these are important for the EU and also the difference between these processes from the point of view of the individual citizen or if implemented collectively. Furthermore, the documents show on one hand the importance of Erasmus+ to stimulate civic engagement and fight Euroscepticism. But on the other hand also that the Program should not be a privilege for a few, but a hyper-inclusive project, open to all.

It should be noted that many of the indications that emerged in the following reports come not only from the various participants in the seminars and related focus groups (involving **more than 1,000 people from 23 countries in approximately 100 focus groups**), but are also the result of approximately **2,300 responses to the questionnaire *You(th) and the 2024 European elections***, launched in February 2024 and distributed until the last European elections in June 2024, with responses coming in particular from young people from Italy, Germany, France, Spain and Poland.

The survey attempted to understand what young people think of the European elections and especially of the European Union, while also investigating in the relations of young people with representative democracy as well as innovative forms, such as citizens' assemblies. The survey further tried to see what relations young people identify between Erasmus+ and civic and political engagement in Europe.

In relation to the actions that reach out to local contexts, PEACE has organized the **Erasmus goes to town** initiative, which represents a way of promoting Erasmus+ through the stories and concrete experiences of the ambassadors of the various Erasmus networks involved. A project, staged from 2022 to 2024 during the various transnational seminars, which saw the participation of **3,500 people** including pupils, students, teachers and school principals in about **40 institutes in Europe**. In practice, small groups of ambassadors with experience in the different sectors of Erasmus+ visited schools and universities together with representatives of the various National Agencies to meet the educational community present in the territory, with the aim of informing and spreading at the same time the values and sense of European identity.

Here is what is urgent according to the PEACE project

Below, a short introductory note to the three lines of action that emerged from the various working groups, with the aim of facilitating an in-depth reading of the final reports

Civic engagement is vital for the future of Erasmus+

The Erasmus+ programme provides an excellent impetus to young people's engagement, but it would also need to be strengthened with a more structured focus on the development of democratic and political skills.

The theme of inclusion must remain a fundamental objective, but also focus on different types of exclusion and different types of minorities.

There is a growing awareness that civic engagement (the basis of the PEACE project) and political engagement must become a mandatory element of the Programme, as a specific and formal objective of the participants.

For the European Commission, there is a link between civic and political engagement. It argues that democratic participation "can also be targeted through non-formal learning activities, which aim at enhancing the skills and competences of young people as well as their active citizenship (EC 2023: 4-5)". However, it is not clear what this means in practice, i.e. it is not clear how civic, community-based, often very local, engagement actually contributes to active political awareness, political and human rights literacy and the development of a political sense of European citizenship.

Differences in Europe need to be told

There still seem to be major differences between Eastern and Western European areas, particularly in terms of their previous lack of attraction for mobile students.

Erasmus+ projects should aim to raise awareness of Europe's colonial past and its long-term effects that continue to this day.

This includes tensions between a central Europe and the peripheries. This refers to deeply rooted mentalities and prejudices that tend to represent the East as backward, regressive and generally different and less developed.

Eastern European students may be willing to do mobility not only out of curiosity or interest in other cultures, but also out of pure necessity. There are no opportunities in their own countries. Additionally, Eastern European students may face forms of discriminatory treatment on mobility, more than Western European students.

The Erasmus+ programme (unintentionally) contributes to creating imbalances between West and East.



Lack of youth representation in the EU can turning away them from Institutions

The importance of existing problems that prevent young people from participating and voting is noted. One of these is the structural gap in youth representation in political institutions in Europe. Indeed, many democratic societies appear as gerontocracies, with older people in charge.

The under-representation of young people is a reality in Europe and also means less intention to participate. Erasmus+ could help to make young people more aware of this, also providing the related skills and abilities to try to address the problem. It is therefore of great importance that young people mobilise to make their voices heard and demand their legitimate inclusion in formal politics.

The dimension of youth participation is analysed in the reports, which shows a more complex picture, in which they may feel distant from formal politics, but this does not mean that they do not engage. Rather, they do it in alternative ways, for example they tend to understand politics differently, more informal and unconventional, based on forms of bottom-up, short-term collaboration, crowdsourcing, a type of DIY-Do-it-yourself politics.

Moreover, according to the **Eurobarometer**, which conducted a post-electoral survey on the recent European elections, among the surprising data is an increase in turnout among the highest segments of the population, but decreasing among young people. The average voter turnout in Europe (50.74%), stable compared to 2019 (50.7%) and increasing compared to 2014 (42.6%), has in fact increased by four percentage points among the over 55s (58%, + 4 points), **while it has decreased among the under 25s (36%, -6 points)**. Turnout remained stable among 25-39 year-olds (46%, -1 percentage point) and 40-54 year-olds (51%, -1 percentage point). This result reverses the pattern observed in the 2019 elections, where turnout increased significantly among young people.

While young people are generally considered more open to European integration, there are some clear indications that in key EU Member States, such as France and Germany, a significant number of them (under 24) voted for the radical right.

This is a dimension and theme that the PEACE project has explored and will explore with its future action PEACE+, for the years 2025-2027.

What role could Erasmus+ play in addressing this challenge?

"Civic engagement regards the commitment of an individual with the 'interests, goals, concerns and common good of a specific community'. It has to do with civic knowledge and sensibility/feelings of solidarity, while civic participation relates to activities that aim at increasing social inclusion and the enhancement of solidarity between citizens and (ethnic and social) groups in society".

"Active citizenship in Europe", Cristiano Bee (2017)



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Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement

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Author

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Introduction

Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement (PEACE) is a Long-Term Action which focusses on the Erasmus+ Programme and its relation to civic engagement, political participation, and European citizenship. The priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme include the creation of

opportunities for people's participation in democratic life, social and civic engagement through formal or non-formal learning activities. The focus is put on raising awareness of and understanding the European Union context, notably as regards the common EU values, the principles of unity and diversity, as well as their social, cultural and historical heritage (EC 2023: 10).

This report contributes to the debate on how Erasmus+ activities and projects may stimulate civic engagement and political participation, amongst young people but also regarding adults. For this purpose, it is important to bring clarity on differences between social and civic engagement, and participation, on one hand, and political engagement and participation, on the other. The report reflects on the importance of engagement and participation for the project of European integration, disentangles the different dimensions of individual and collective engagement and participation, and briefly discusses how the Erasmus+ Programme relates to civic and political involvement.

The second part of the report brings the results of the international conference 'Erasmus+ Contribution to European civic participation', held on 19 and 20 December in Naples, Italy. At the event, on the afternoon of 19 December 2022, 11 deliberative roundtables were organized with a total of 110 participants. The deliberations focussed on the importance of engagement, participation and European citizenship, civic and political knowledge of the EU, and a focussed discussion on how the Erasmus+ Programme may contribute to enhancing civic engagement and participation, political literacy and participation, European citizenship education, a critical mindset, and adherence to European values. The rich discussions are represented by brief snippets of core insights and observations that emerged during the deliberations between stakeholders. In the final part, 15 of the most significant recommendations that were proposed by the participants are presented. The recommendations form a highly useful and rich input for further discussions on how to re-imagine and re-invent the role of the Erasmus+ Programme in stimulating the civic, political and critical attitudes of (young) European citizens towards the European Union.

The annex contains an interview with Laura Cinquini, who reflects on her experiences as university student, Erasmus intern in Germany, and participant and citizen Ambassador in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

1. Why are civic and political engagement important for the EU?

The importance of engagement

There is a much discussion of civic and democratic engagement, and in fact civic engagement is one of the 4 core objectives of the Erasmus+ programme. In the Programme for 2021-27, the European Commission states that a major challenge relates to the Europe-wide trends of limited participation in democratic life and low levels of knowledge and awareness about European matters and their impact on the lives of all European citizens. Many people are reluctant, or face difficulties, in actively engaging and participating in their communities or in the European Union's political and social life. Strengthening European identity and the participation of young people in democratic processes is of paramount importance for the European Union's future. This issue can also be targeted through non-formal learning activities, which aim at enhancing the skills and competences of young people as well as their active citizenship (EC 2023: 4-5).

Why is engagement then seen as so important? Beyond the usual reasons given – for instance, promoting common European values, furthering inclusiveness, and unity in diversity - there are immediate urgent, concrete reasons, including the rise of illiberalism and authoritarianism, the erosion of democracy, and the decline of a civic spirit in Europe.

First of all, there is the persistent problem with Euroscepticism and a declining trust in the European project. Many “friends of the EU” are concerned that the European Union - or better the European project - is not anymore part of a widely shared consensus. Many European citizens, including young people, seem uninterested in Europe, take its achievements for granted, or are even increasingly critical of the European project. Many, in fact, vote for populist parties which demand a return to nation-states and national sovereignty. At the same time, a larger part of European citizens seems to have an only partial or skewed understanding what the EU is about. Here, civic engagement and political knowledge become crucial. A more active engagement with the EU, EU policies, and politics may importantly change people's perspectives and appreciation of the EU. And it may also enhance a critical awareness. In fact, it should be acknowledged that there are many things that do not work in the EU – for instance, the implications of economic austerity and neoliberal governance, or major corruption scandals. Here, critical awareness and pro-active citizens are crucial in holding the EU accountable.

A second issue is a more widespread and complex problem: general disaffection with representative democracy and our democratic societies, which affects the European Union but clearly also its Member States. This general distrust includes increasing forms of polarization and radicalization in our societies and in Europe at large, feeding declining sentiments of tolerance, decreased openness and willingness to display solidarity with others. In general, populism is seen as a reaction of people who feel disenfranchised, left out. Specifically, some argue that we find youth support for right-wing populism due to the precariousness of the youth labour market. To counter democratic discontent, we need possibilities for meaningful participation in democratic politics. Renewal of democracy requires citizens who feel empowered and who are able to make their grievances heard and acted upon, such as consistent lack of attention for youth problems. Citizenship education becomes crucial here. Citizens who know how to act, which instruments to use, to be effective in making institutions listen are at the core of democratic renovation.

A third issue regards what can be called a decline in civic spirit. People seem increasingly hyper-individualized, hedonistic, navel-staring - or better -iPhone-staring - persons, predominantly concerned with their self-interest, their individual capacities to compete, and their employability and marketability. A broader concern for the common good and feelings of solidarity Europe-wide, or even beyond, seem largely missing. To counteract this, a hands-on engagement with practical civic projects, and collaboration with other people to try to bring about social change might re-ignite a civic spirit, which is essential for democratic societies.

A fourth major concern is the emergence of uncivil forces, that is, those societal forces that promote values that are in direct contrast with the European values as described in art. 2 Treaty on the European Union: discriminatory positions, anti-pluralism, anti-openness, contesting human rights, denying solidarity. Active citizens are hence needed to defend the core values of our democratic societies.

2. What do we mean by engagement?

But if civic and political involvement of European citizens is crucial for defending and strengthening the European integration project, what should we understand by civic engagement? How does civic engagement relate to political engagement and political participation? And how is it different? And, finally, what do we mean by active citizenship? One important difference is between social and civic activities, on one hand, and political activities, on the other.

In Active citizenship in Europe, Cristiano Bee (2017) gives us a useful definition: civic engagement regards the engagement of an individual with the 'interests, goals, concerns and common good of a specific community' (Bee 2017: 68). Civic engagement has to do with civic knowledge and sensibility/feelings of solidarity, while civic participation relates to activities that aim at increasing social inclusion and the enhancement of solidarity between citizens and (ethnic and social) groups in society. In the context of Erasmus+, the dimensions of civic engagement and participation are highly relevant in parts of the programme that relate to forms of volunteering, internships, and/or youth work.

Table 1: Engagement and participation

	Civic engagement	Political engagement	Civic participation	Political participation
Individual	Civic knowledge, attention	Political knowledge, attention	Civic individual action	Political individual action (conventional; nonconventional)
Collective	Group belonging, identification	Political group belonging, identification	Civic collective action	Political collective action (conventional; nonconventional)

Source: Bee 2017: 71.

Broadly speaking, civic engagement and participation relate to activities that enhance the professional development of individual (young) people, and hence are focussed on individual skills and success as well as the wider labour market, while, in some cases, civic engagement

may also relate to a political dimension, that is, it promotes civic skills, a critical awareness, community and European values, tolerance and solidarity. While in civic participation, the explicit objective is not to relate to formal politics or public policy in any strict sense, the effects of civic participation may relate to broader political dimensions.

For instance, in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2023, the Commission aims at enhancing ‘opportunities for people’s participation in democratic life, social and civic engagement through formal or non-formal learning activities’ (EC 2023: 10). The expectation is that through Erasmus+ activities, including volunteering and youth work, social, and even democratic and political engagement and participation are stimulated. However, while some evaluations indicate a (modest) impetus for civic engagement in the longer run as a result of participation in Erasmus (RAY 2021: 271-3),¹ this does not indicate an unequivocal relation between activities such as volunteering and youth work, on one hand, and the civic, political and European attitudes – and more specifically, political involvement – of participants, on the other. Hence, a relation that is often presumed and articulated – that participation in Erasmus+ enhances a ‘more just, human rights-friendly and integrated Europe’ and contributes to the ‘renewal of the European integration project’ – cannot be taken for granted (Ohana 2019: 24, 17).

In fact, the political dimension of forms of civic engagement is a complex one. The relation between politics, and educational and learning activities is ever more frequently seen as problematic, because education and activities related to political dimensions (e.g. human rights) are by some understood as ‘inappropriate’, as compromising the ‘neutral’ mission of education, or even as potentially leading to ‘indoctrination’ (Ohana 2019: 10). Hence, the political dimension of youth work and volunteering involves controversy and is perceived in contrasting ways by different stakeholders and participants. Further problems are the disinterest or even rejection by some participants of the political dimension and the perception that attention for political matters compromises attention for other, more urgent issues (such as skills training for the job market) (Ohana 2019: 15-16).

Distinct from the dimension of civic engagement, where the focus is predominantly attitudes towards the community and social aspects (and where the political appears more of a ‘by-product’, a latent potential), political engagement and political participation directly relate to political attitudes and practices. Political participation can be understood as individuals acting or being active as citizens, on a voluntary basis, in relation to political objectives (CoE/EC 2021). It can be conventional (related to more traditional political activities, such as voting or being member of a party), or nonconventional (related to less traditional activities, such as signing petitions, being politically active online, being member of a social movement, engaging in civil disobedience).

An explicit, and critical, political dimension and an emphasis on European citizenship are generally less emphasized in European mobility programmes, and remain underdeveloped in mobility and educational projects. Nevertheless, democracy is one of the four priorities of the Erasmus+ programme, and is particularly relevant for the KA2 and KA3 parts. In KA1 (learning

¹ For instance, the RAY MON Comparative Data Report for 2014-2020 found an increase in information, engagement, active civic support, and democratic participation ranging from 30 to almost 50 % of the participants in European youth programmes (2021: 271-6). In the extensive ESN survey on active citizenship and student exchange in the context of the European Parliamentary elections of 2019, key findings indicated that one out of four respondents did not know what civil participation is, and that students feel not acquainted with civil society organisations on the European level, but also that mobile students are far more engaged than the average European youth and are more likely to vote in European elections (ESN 2019).

mobility of individuals), there is no specific focus on democracy and political citizenship, and in general, these dimensions are not visible and lack structural integration into the different part of the programme (EPRS 2021: 49, 54).

In the “universe” of the Erasmus+ programme, political engagement and participation – not least regarding European politics – and European citizenship education are relatively difficult to identify (EPRS 2021). One way of stimulating the political dimension could be by means of a targeted European citizenship education. According to one study, there is a lack of ‘concrete policy measures on citizenship education’, while the ‘policies that the EU has taken are primarily driven by a desire to get people on the labour market’ (EPC 2020: 7; emphasis in original). According to a research report of the European parliament, “[c]itizenship education should get a higher priority in the selection process of Erasmus+ projects’ (EPRS 2021: 54; emphasis in original).

3. How can the Erasmus+ programme stimulate engagement?

Civic and social engagement and participation are often referred to, not least in relation to the Erasmus+ programme (as in volunteering, youth internships and work), or also in other programmes, such as the European Solidarity Corps. According to the Commission, there is a tangible link between civic and political engagement. The Commission holds that democratic participation ‘can also be targeted through non-formal learning activities, which aim at enhancing the skills and competences of young people as well as their active citizenship’. It is, however, not clear what this means in practice, that is, it is not evident how civic and community engagement – often very local - actually contribute to active political awareness, political and human rights literacy, and the development of a political sense of European citizenship. Moreover, as stated in the aforementioned report of the European Parliament Research Service, in Erasmus+’s KA1 – on student and teacher mobility – there is no explicit focus on political citizenship, but participants rather ‘experience social and cultural elements of citizenship’ (2021: 54). Hence, there tends to be less attention for explicit political issues, and there is a lack of a structural, explicit attention to European citizenship.

Therefore, one the core objectives of PEACE is to discuss and debate, explore, and develop the political dimension – and related dimensions such as political engagement and activism, the development of a critical mindset, and of EU political knowledge - and explicitly advance a series of innovative ideas and proposals on how civic and political engagement may be stimulated in a range of different, but interconnected, more systematic ways.

More specifically, this would address the major concerns in Europe regarding youth participation and the political socialisation of young people. Many worry that young people do not participate, in particular in formal politics (conventional engagement). In fact, research shows that young people today have the least trust in democracy than any other age group (Foa et al. 2020). Young people under 30 are underrepresented in politics and tend not to be involved in political life, in particular in that part of political life where real decisions are being taken. In terms of voter turnout, that is elections, young people tend to be less engaged (even if the last EP elections in 2019 saw an important increase). Young people do however seem to

engage in alternative, less formal forms, of political participation, such as through Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future (see EPRS 2021). Such forms of politics tend however not to be well-connected with arenas of decision-making and policy-making. Young people tend to understand politics differently, in a more informal and non-conventional fashion, based on bottom-up, short-term forms of collaboration, crowdsourcing, do it ourselves type of politics.

And in fact, students come from very different backgrounds, contexts, and situations. Erasmus students and beneficiaries may build on very different experiences, for instance with regard to socio-economic situations, personal trajectories, or opportunities for civic and political engagement (the latter may include contexts of authoritarianism or democratic decline). Some students may lack extensive experience with engagement, which may also mean that they are much less knowledgeable about what for instance rights really mean in practice, how important political engagement is, and generally regarding how fragile many of the EU's values are in practice (including democracy, human rights, non-discrimination), always in need of defence. In fact, with regard to European democracy, a core matter is: what kind of knowledge do people actually have of European politics and institutions, and of the kind of instruments that are available (and young people should be aware of)?

Over the years, a range of participatory tools have been developed in the EU, and which are generally accessible for citizens (see Good Lobby 2019; Alemanno 2022). These include:

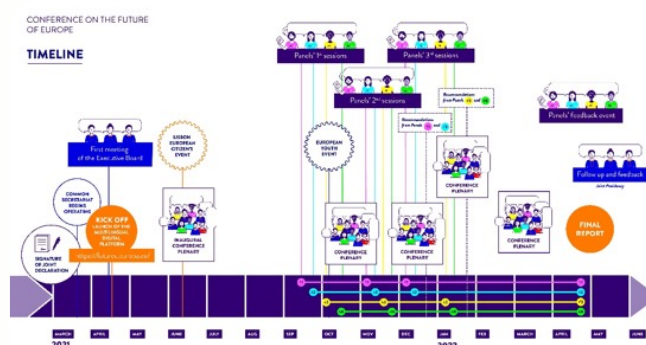
- a.** Freedom of information request. Any citizen or resident may request access to documents of the EU's institutions, bodies, offices, and agencies.
- b.** Complaint to the EU Ombudsman. The European Ombudsman represents the interests of the citizens and protects them from EU institutions. Citizens, residents as well as businesses, associations and other bodies registered in the EU can file a complaint.
- c.** European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). The ECI enables 7 citizens from 7 different member states to propose new legislation to the European Commission. 1 million signatures from 7 member states need to be collected (initiatives include the Right to Water, Save Bees and Farmers).
- d.** Petition to the European Parliament. Citizens can present observations or requests to the EU Parliaments' Committee of Petitions, asking the Parliament to take a position or to raise its awareness on an issue.

An exciting novelty in terms of citizens' participation is that of Citizens' Assemblies. This novelty is inspired by a unique experiment, that of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which was held from April 2021 to May 2022.² The Conference included 800 randomly selected citizens from all over Europe and from various walks of life, of which at least a third of young people under 25, who engaged in three rounds of deliberation in specific thematic European Citizens' Panels (in the Annex, you can find an interview with one of the student participants, and citizen

² The Conference on the Future of Europe has been monitored and analysed by the European University Institute/ School of Transnational Governance Transnational Democracy Observatory, see <https://www.eui.eu/en/academic-units/school-of-transnational-governance/stg-projects/transnational-democracy-at-the-school-of-transnational-governance/eui-transnational-democracy-observatory/evaluating-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe>. The Conference was also monitored assessed by transnational civil society, such as those grouped in the coalition Citizens Take over Europe (CTOE), see <https://citizenstakeover.eu/>.

ambassador, Laura Cinquini). A number of citizens were subsequently selected as Ambassadors and participated in the Conference's Plenary, which included Members of European Parliament, national politicians, local and regional authorities, representatives of the Council, Commission and Committee of the Regions, as well as civil society and social partners. The Citizens' Panels produced 178 recommendations, which were discussed in the Plenary. The Plenary itself produced a final report with 49 proposals and more than 200 measures. Important for the discussion here are a number of proposals directly related to the Erasmus+ Programme.

Table 1 Timeline of the Conference on the Future of Europe



Source: Futureu.europa.eu.

These proposals include:

22. We propose that the EU, in particular in its actions at the international level, ..., improve its accessibility for citizens through better information, education, citizen participation, and transparency of its action. "Allocating a specific budget to develop educational programmes on the functioning of the EU and its values that it could propose to the Member States that wish, so that they can integrate them into their curricula (primary, secondary schools, and universities). In addition, a specific course on the EU and its functioning could be offered to students wishing to study in another European country through the Erasmus programme. Students choosing this course would be given priority in the allocation of said Erasmus programmes".

48. "In order to promote a culture of exchange and foster European identity and European diversity across different areas, the Member States, with the support of the European Union, should: 1. Promote European exchanges in different fields, both physically and digitally, including educational exchanges, twinning, travel and professional mobility (including for teachers and local elected politicians). Such exchanges should be made accessible across Member States for all, regardless of their age, level of education, background and financial means. With this overall aim, the EU should inter alia strengthen existing EU level exchange and mobility programmes, such as the European Solidarity Corps, Erasmus+ and DiscoverEU, and ensure more widespread and diverse participation in these programmes and consider adding also new elements, such as an additio-

nal objective of civic service fostered through volunteering (for the European Solidarity Corps) and 'cultural passes' (for DiscoverEU). The local and regional authorities, under the auspices of the Committee of the Regions have a key role to play in this matter".

In the wake of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the European Commission has set up a new generation of Citizens' Panels, to be a regular form of citizen deliberation/consultation, ahead of key legislative proposals. The Commission is running three panels since December 2022, on food waste, virtual reality, and – most relevant for PEACE - learning mobility.

4. Deliberative roundtables in Naples, December 2022

During the international event 'Erasmus+ Contribution to European civic participation', held on 19 and 20 December in Naples, Italy, 11 deliberative roundtables were organized with a total of 110 participants. The variety of participants included Erasmus alumni, representatives from higher education institutions, adult education, primary and secondary schools, Erasmus ambassadors, role models, and staff from National Agencies. The tables were moderated by a facilitator, and discussions were reported by a note taker. The deliberations focussed on the importance of engagement, participation and European citizenship, civic and political knowledge of the EU, and a focussed discussion on how the Erasmus+ Programme may contribute to enhancing civic engagement and participation, political literacy and participation, European citizenship education, a critical mindset, and adherence to European values. The 11 tables concluded with the selection of a number of key recommendations, voted on by the participants. Below, a selection of the key observations and insights that emerged in the discussions are presented, and subsequently 15 of the most significant proposals are put forward.

a. Social engagement

- National Agencies might want to get involved in the organization of summer schools or organize volunteering opportunities (Table 3).
- Erasmus should engage with activities that contrast Euroscepticism, that provide a wider knowledge of the European project, and that promote European values and rights, as less and less people seem to believe in the European Union (Table 5).
- Engagement may include the involvement of students in extracurricular activities concerning the environment (Table 4).
- An example of how to foster volunteering on exchange with Erasmus students may be to join a semester-long volunteering programme and subsequently take part in weekly activities with local NGOs. The local ESN section may be responsible for coordinating the activities and supporting the students. Students get guidance to reflect on their knowledge and think about the impact of their actions (Table 4).
- Civic engagement means responsibility. An example of good practice, which articulates the importance of civic engagement and the responsibility that it implies is the re-creation of town councils, created and performed by students (in the school sector)

(Table 7).

- Civic engagement can be stimulated through concrete incentives or rewards, such as credits (for internships, for instance) (Table 10).

b. Political engagement

- The idea of “youth city parliaments” may be taken as a form of best practice (Table 3).
- Educational programmes might organize simulations of the European Parliament using Virtual Reality (Table 3).
- An example of a best practice is the “International Village” event held at Polish universities. It includes students preparing a quiz, followed by a student debate. The topics are selected by the students themselves, who indicate topics that matter to them. Developing specific methodologies (e.g. gamification) is crucial to get young people engaged (Table 6).
- It is important to provide deep and systematic preparation beforehand to people involved in Erasmus mobility (on the education system, on politics and the political system, on attitudes towards the EU, and regarding cultural and historical aspects). The Erasmus Student Network could play a strategic role in this (Table 7).
- Civic and political engagement and participation are time- and energy-consuming. For many people, engagement takes too much time and involves too much work. One should consider how to incentivize people, reward them in some manner, and/or make convincing claims about the satisfactions, achievements (Table 9).
- Many of the available instruments, such as the right to petition or the European Citizens’ Initiative – remain little known. It is important to teach them to students (Table 11).

c. Civic education/EU education

- The Erasmus programme could use more education on Erasmus and mobility itself as well as more broadly about the EU, EU democracy, EU citizenship (and related matters such as the Schengen agreement, EU passport) and possibilities for civic participation (Table 1).
- Young people tend to be less knowledgeable about and interested in political topics. There is a generation gap. Pan-European mobility might help to stimulate interest and participation (Table 1). There is a tendency among young students to act in an individualistic manner and participate little in collective activities when in mobility programmes. More exposure to programmes and courses on civic engagement might help to stimulate engagement and participation (Table 2).
- Erasmus+ can stimulate engagement through the development of European curricula on crucial subjects for society as a whole (such as sustainability, violence, hate speech and bullying). An example of good practice is, have students re-write well-known fairy tales in order to tackle themes such as bullying and discrimination (Table 7).
- Jean Monnet activities (knowledge and modules on the European Project) could be exploited more and better for schools, creating easy modules for teachers on European institutions and European policies (Table 10).

d. Role of educators/teachers

- It is important to convince more teaching personnel of the importance and usefulness of Erasmus+ projects. Teachers are often unaware or sceptical of such projects. The benefits and positive sides of Erasmus+ projects could be communicated better to teaching personnel (Table 4).
- Erasmus+ can help people to get closer to EU institutions (not least with regard to critical issues), but specific actors – beneficiaries/stakeholders, teachers, educators - must help and accompany students towards this approach, offering them the right tools (against polarization and estrangement). An example of good practice is introducing civic and political elements in the curriculum, such as in a conservatory, the introduction and presentation women composers to children/students, to start a discussion about human rights and the role of women in society (Table 7).

e. Local embedding/peripheral areas

- In the context of civic and political engagement, it is necessary to find ways to involve rural areas, and in general, “left-behind places” or disadvantaged areas, in a more structural fashion (Table 3).
- EU citizens tend not to be so engaged in their community. The solution might be to enhance cooperation with some associations (for example: against the mafia). Hence, it is important to strengthen links with to associations, also to try to overcome the fact that the EU is seen as related to “far-away issues”. The local and global perspectives have to be linked (Table 6).
- Erasmus+ helps to change one’s mind, to open pupils’ horizons, particularly for those that live in small villages, where there is only one school and the church. ERASMUS+ provides an opportunity to teachers to train and develop new methodologies. Erasmus+ has an impact on pupils but also on their families (Table 10).

f. Information

- A problem identified by participants is the lack of positive information on the EU and knowledge of the advantages of EU citizenship (Table 1). The EU could do more to communicate about advantages of citizenship and civic engagement, also by increasing the mobility rate of various types of citizens and enhance teaching matters related to the EU and EU citizenship (table 1).
- Civic engagement needs knowledge of the past and the present, knowledge of the EU as well as practical knowledge in order to allow for effective participation (Table 11).

g. Collaboration between stakeholders

- The synergetic collaboration between non-governmental organizations (NGOs), higher education institutions, and national agencies is needed in order to foster civic and political engagement and to embed such engagement in local communities (Table 3). Such collaboration might take the form of “openLabs”, connecting civil society with higher

education institutions (also through specific web tools), as occurs in France (Table 3).

- Students should get involved more with local associations, starting from the local level, schools, NGOs, and different types of associations (Table 4).
- Northern EU countries are less much informed about how southern EU countries are affected by the climate and ecological crisis. Strategic partnerships could be a tool to better know “each-other” on relevant issues (migration, socio-economic matters). An example of good practice regards student reporters, who, while on Erasmus mobility, could offer an overview of political and social affairs linked to the country they are visiting (Table 7).
- It is important to develop cooperation with local organizations (regarding, for instance, voluntary activities or service work), non-institutional actors, as well as local authorities, developing activities that help embedding mobile people into local networks (Table 8).

5. 15 key recommendations

1. Introduce **civic education** in international programmes as well as insert European topics in education to improve knowledge of political topics and stimulate civic engagement. EU education must become a mandatory topic, in order to emphasize the importance of integration as well as of international mobility, and to reduce prejudices (Table 1).
2. Improve the **connection between schools and the Europe Direct offices**, because there is a lack of communication and interaction/collaboration with educational institutions (Table 1).
3. It is important to **open projects to local authorities** to improve European citizenship in a sort of social service learning (related to extra-curricular activities). It is important to embed projects in the local context (Table 2).
4. In order to stimulate civic engagement, it is important to create **a support structure to engage headmasters, teachers, and all school leaders** (Table 2).
5. Focus on the **needs of local communities**, in the local language (e.g. foreign students coming to Naples or another European city to help peripheral communities in solving specific issues, mediated by local institutions) (Table 3).
6. Create national, “customizable” programmes to favour local communities and help to connect students with NGOs (Table 3).
7. The **recognition of informal and non-formal learning in formal education** mobilities and a more extensive focus on the connection with local realities, involving the participants in the political, civil and social life of their hosting communities. Erasmus participants should be given the spaces to participate in public life through volunteering, engagement with stakeholders, etc. (Table 4).
8. The creation of an “**Erasmus Radio**” – or podcast series - as an example of joint promotion at the European level, complementary to other channels (Table 4).
9. Activities and practical simulation on **reproducing a Parliamentary assembly**, to

familiarize students with the experience of EU institution (Table 5).

10. Erasmus+ should not be a privilege, but **inclusive, open to everyone**. A way of opening up Erasmus is by means of blended and virtual exchange (internships and classes); connecting with people in the community/host families, also for people with disabilities; involve stakeholders more extensively and apply for extra funds for inclusion (Table 6).

11. Erasmus+ needs to **increase opportunities for engagement of and interaction between local students** with incoming Erasmus students: to avoid the “Erasmus bubble” and increase civic and political osmosis. One way of achieving this is by increasing the number of study/research projects in which incoming Erasmus and local students collaborate and co-develop, to help creating a proper international student community (Table 7).

12. Erasmus+ could develop **extracurricular activities** – for instance in the format of deliberative fora/roundtables – debating the importance of engagement, participation, also regarding the European level. Such activities also stimulate specific skills such public speaking, argumentation, assertive communication (Table 8).

13. Erasmus+ should be systematised and made structurally available for everyone, in the structure of education, towards a **right to Erasmus for everyone** (Table 10).

14. To use the resources created by the **Jean Monnet** programme to support teachers with training modules on the European Project and European citizenship (Table 10).

15. Not everybody has the possibility and funds for mobility so the suggestion is to **take advantage of students who experienced Erasmus+ mobility as a multiplier factor**: not only disseminating the Erasmus+ opportunities but also the awareness of Europe and different cultures and traditions and internationalisation (Table 11).

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ANNEX Interview with Laura M. Cinquini



Interview with Laura M. Cinquini, former student of the University of Bologna, participant and ambassador in the Conference on the Future of Europe, and Erasmus intern (interviewed by Paul Blokker).

1. Could you tell us about your experience in the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE)? How was it to be a selected citizen? And how did it change your life?

Honestly, the Conference was a life-changer experience. Looking back, I think it was a blessing that I was given such an opportunity as I wouldn't be who I am today without it. It really transformed me. Now I am more aware of the EU institutions, of their way of working, of their space of working. I also developed a sort of expert knowledge on the migration topic as I worked on it for almost a year with citizens, politicians, trade unionists, members of the civil society. My personal development throughout and thanks to the Conference was huge and was not only intellectual but also more personal, deeper. I got used to politics life, to dialogue and teamwork, to lonely travels – which for me were something totally new. I started to feel at home everywhere in Europe... the Conference made stronger and more tangible my European identity. And it gave me a new, big, European family which includes Mansef from France, Huub from Netherlands, Gaby from Germany, Krasi from Bulgaria, Dragan from Croatia, Iness from Portugal... and many many others. Clearly, I cannot bore you with too many names which mean nothing to you while to me they mean everything. Literally. They mean happy memories

and strong emotions. They mean discussions, speeches, public letters, interviews. They mean months of hard work and hard parties. They mean the Europe of the Future because the citizens which took part to the Conference didn't just make proposals for shaping the future of Europe, they actually showed it, they lived this future. Therefore, their proposals come from their mind as well as from their heart and life experience.

2. Did the CoFE experience make you more willing to engage in political participation?

I am not affiliated to any political party but I've always been interested in politics and political themes. Surely, the Conference strengthened this previous interest.

3. Did you feel empowered as a citizen in the CoFE? Or do you perhaps have mixed feelings?

I felt empowered as a citizen, during the Conference. I felt that my voice was giving a contribute for real. But today I have more mixed feelings. The Conference success depends entirely on the actual use the EU institutions will make of our proposals and for now... I haven't witnessed such a great, transparent, honest use of them. From the human side, the Conference has already succeeded. But it is not enough. I want it to be also a political success, after all the efforts we spent on it. The citizens deserve answers and actions inspired by their work. It is also a matter of respect. Not to mention that the EU institutions gave their word, they promised to follow-up. Their credibility is on stake... as well as the possibility of having a new kind of democracy in the upcoming years. I believe in this kind of democracy but still don't know if I believe in the EU institutions; I am withholding my judgement to wait and see what it will come.

4. Which are the most important recommendations of CoFE for young people you think?

All of them. Certainly, the proposals made on topics like Youth, Education, Sport and so on are closer to young people and their daily life. Nevertheless, what really would benefit young people is an overall improvement of European politics, the society, the economy.

5. Did the experience of CoFe make you want to engage in other European experiences, such as your Erasmus internship? Or where you already planning such experiences? And how would you say the Erasmus internship changed you and your views?

Doing an Erasmus internship has always been a personal desire. Even before the Conference, I was sure that doing experiences abroad would have been useful and fruitful from a human and professional point of view. The Conference didn't really influence that choice. Actually, it made my application more complex to process because in the same period I had to deal with European plenaries and meetings on the one hand, university lessons and exams plus research and bureaucratic stuff for the Erasmus on the other hand.

Anyway, I am happy that I managed it eventually and that I was able to do an internship in Germany. I worked at the Landesmuseum of Hannover, co-organising a Chinese art exhibition... even if I actually did a little bit of everything, thus getting know more and more about how a museum works behind the public scene. Now I have more professional skills.



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PARTICIPATION ERASMUS ALUMNI
FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Participation and Civic Engagement in Erasmus+

Malmö – 2-4 October 2023

Author

Paul Blokker

AGENZIA NAZIONALE

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*This report was written in the context of the **TCA Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement (PEACE)**, coordinated by INDIRE/Erasmus Agency Italy, and more in particular, in relation to the International seminar of PEACE, held in Malmö, Sweden, 1-4 October 2023. The author expresses his gratitude to the organizers of the event of the Swedish Council for Higher Education and the INDIRE/Erasmus Agency Italy, as well as to Arjan Verdooren, co-convenor of the event on the morning of 2 October.*

Section 1

Introduction

Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement (PEACE) is a Long-Term Action with an original mission: exploring the relation between social and civic engagement, political participation, and European citizenship, on one hand, and the Erasmus+ Programme, on the other. In fact, the priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme include the creation of

opportunities for people's participation in democratic life, social and civic engagement through formal or non-formal learning activities. The focus is put on raising awareness of and understanding the European Union context, notably as regards the common EU values, the principles of unity and diversity, as well as their social, cultural and historical heritage (EC 2023: 10).

This report – the second one in the PEACE Action - contributes to the debate by discussing the importance of and relevance of civic and political competences in the context of the Erasmus+ programme, as well as in relation to wider European citizenship. International mobility may in that sense be understood as a form of “testing ground” for European citizenship, in which difficulties such as socio-economic inequality, exclusion, discrimination and the lack of a true transnational European society and public sphere manifest themselves in a myriad of ways. In fact, Erasmus+ attempts to help overcome such difficulties by stimulating inclusion, pluralism and inter-cultural forms of knowledge. In this sense, the Erasmus+ programme may be equally of great relevance for the ongoing discussions of the Future of Europe, and the way in which core challenges regarding citizenship, inclusion, non-discrimination may be addressed more effectively in the future.

An important question for European citizenship is: what do we actually mean by civic and political engagement in Europe, and what are the relevant key competences? Such competences classically relate to elections and voting (of great relevance in relation to the upcoming European Parliament elections of June 2024). Civic and political competences however also go beyond the electoral dimension, for instance in the form of practical skills regarding participatory, interactive/communicative, critical, and deliberative skills. An additional dimension is that of civic culture, in relation to recognizing equality and humanity, respecting rights, acting responsibly, and promoting the common good. A core, outstanding question hence remains the extent to which Erasmus+ stimulates active political awareness, political and human rights literacy, and the development of a political sense of European citizenship.

The second part reports on the fruitful and intense discussions and deliberations held at the international conference ‘Participation and Civic Engagement in Erasmus+’, held in Malmö, Sweden, on 1-4 October 2023. At the event, various deliberative roundtables were organized with a total of more than 100 participants. Three topical and politically sensitive themes in relation to the EU – gender inequality, Europe and its colonial past, and the distinction between Eastern and Western Europe - were introduced in the plenary, accompanied by a main discussion statement. These were subsequently the basis for deliberation by participants in more than 10 roundtables. The report provides brief recollections of the main points of discussion in the roundtables.

The third part discusses Malmö's 'Train the Trainers' session for a range of different Erasmus+ participants (such as students, Ambassadors, staff from National Agencies, members of the Erasmus Student Network, teachers and educators). This training dealt with three main thematic fields of relevance to Erasmus+: youth political and civic engagement; European citizenship education; and social inclusion, diversity, non-discrimination. These fields were briefly introduced in the plenary, accompanied by a main thesis, and subsequently debated by participants in over 10 roundtables, helped by a facilitator. The key goals of the training were: deeper knowledge with regard to civic and political themes in international mobility/Erasmus+ (knowledge); awareness of the multiple civic and political dimensions of the Erasmus+ programme (awareness); development of a critical-constructive view (critical-reflexive mindset); and participatory and conflict-resolution (learning to participate). The various group discussions are briefly reconstructed per theme.

The debates and group discussions in Malmö have raised numerous important insights, which will feed into future debates within the PEACE Action, will inspire some of the outputs of the Action (including E-modules), and will hopefully encourage other actions and events, and stimulate wider debate on civic and political engagement among European mobile citizens.

Section 2

Civic and political competences in Erasmus+

1. What question are civic and political engagement and skills the answer to?

Civic and democratic engagement are a clear priority, not least with regard to young people, of whom it is expected that they do not only develop professional skills during their educational lives, but equally civic and political competences. In fact, civic engagement is one of the four core objectives of the Erasmus+ programme.

In broader societal terms, this attention to civic and political engagement is due to various challenges and crises that affect European societies. In other words, the strengthening of civic and political competences and more broadly democratic and rule of law cultures are seen as the only answer to bring stability to our democratic societies.

One challenge regards increasing levels of polarization and forms of closed group thinking on core issues (e.g. climate change, migration, the EU itself), and even forms of radicalization in society (with increasing levels of political violence). Different groups in society are increasingly in opposition to each other, making democracy as a form of peaceful conflict resolution increasingly difficult.

Another challenge is the increasing exclusion of groups in society, who feel not represented by politics and who less and less participate in collective life (e.g. NEETs, migrant groups).

A further challenge that affects the European project directly is the resurgence of nationalism and the view of the European Union is a menace for national identity and sovereignty. European integration is being seriously put to the test.

In this sense, a final challenge is the lack of extensive debate on the Future of Europe itself, beyond the EU institutions.

The Erasmus programme and political engagement

But we can also look more specifically at *international mobility* and the *Erasmus+ programme* itself, and ask ourselves, what is the civic and political engagement dimension all good for? Here, there are equally important challenges to bring out.

The functional, instrumentalist dimension of the programme, in relation to *employability* and *individual skills development* is clearly essential but tends to be largely individualistic and competition-oriented. A more developed component in the Erasmus+ programme that deals with solidarity and collective engagement might importantly strengthen the European citizenship dimension.

A further – in some ways little discussed dimension – in international mobility regards *forms of exclusion* (including of specific minority groups or nationalities, and gender-bias). Sure enough, some attention is being paid to financial and materials difficulties, and the fact that people from less wealthy socio-economic backgrounds are much less inclined to participate in international mobility. But other, equally important factors of exclusion, related to migrant or ethnic backgrounds, with regard to specific nationalities, or having to do with gender identity, are hardly discussed. In fact, there is very little systematic data on the ethnic or migrant background of participants in the Erasmus programme, nor of gender identity beyond the classical male/female distinction. Also, the peculiarity of international mobility having a conspicuous gender-bias towards female participants is not discussed in its complexity.

All these identity-related dimensions have a clear civic and political dimension. In fact, the Erasmus+ programme is about *inclusion*. It is however difficult to be inclusive if we do not know extensively what the exclusionary factors and barriers may be and how these manifest themselves in reality. What is in particular important is a close analysis of forms of intersectionality, that is, the overlapping and accumulating forms of exclusion, for instance in the form of ethnic, socio-economic, and geographical background of participants.

Another internal as well as external challenge is how Erasmus contributes to debates on European citizenship and understandings of what citizenship means in practice. As mobile Europeans, Erasmus participants would have an awful lot to say about how it is being mobile (as a kind of ideal-type of European citizenship). As the sociologist Adrian Favell already noted 15 years or so ago, even for the “Eurostars”, mobile professionals in Europe, being mobile is not always easy and includes a various difficult challenges (Favell 2011). A broader debate about these mobile experiences should feed into debates in European citizenship.

In a related way, the discussion on the Future of Europe is clearly important for the Erasmus+ programme. It is not clear how such a relationship is however being exploited in reality. One example is the recently held European Citizens’ Panel on Learning Mobility, where National Agencies and the Erasmus Student Network were involved, but were ultimately important questions – related into to citizenship, inclusion, non-discrimination – were not systematically addressed.

European Citizens' Panel on Learning mobility

The European Commission held a European Citizens' Panel on Learning Mobility, in the Spring of 2023, from 3 March until 30 April. The panel was a follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021-2). The panel took the form of a citizens' deliberative assembly, which is intended as a way of bringing European citizens closer to decision-making and to provide a platform for citizen participation. The panel on Learning Mobility contributed to preparatory work for a Council Recommendation on learning mobility and to informing the European Commission on the topic. Three deliberative sessions were held, two in Brussels and one online. 142 randomly selected European citizens (with a third of young people) debated on learning mobility and the general question of how to make mobility accessible to everyone. Deliberations focussed on the identification of target groups for learning mobility, as well as the discussion of challenges and obstacles to access learning mobility. The final session included the adoption of 21 final recommendations. These included:

- A vehicular language (lingua franca) as a tool for learning mobility (recommendation 1)
- Expansion of existing learning mobility programs for people of all ages and socio-economic layers (Recommendation 3)
- Expansion of existing learning mobility programs for people of all ages and socio-economic layers (Recommendation 4)
- Enabling learning mobility for families (Recommendation 5)
- Ambassadors for a more mobile Europe (Recommendation 11)
- For greener learning mobility! (Recommendation 13)
- Measures and activities to promote non-discrimination in learning mobility (Recommendation 18)

Source: https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/learning-mobility-panel_en

2. What are civic and political competences?

Let us now take a closer look at civic and political competences. What do we actually mean by civic and political competences or civic and political skills? Classically, civic and political competences were seen as in close relationship to voting, as electoral democracy has been the main democratic system since the 1950s. A core dimension in this is cognitive, that is, distinctive knowledge of politics, of institutions, of the rules of the game. We could call this the ideal of the *"informed citizen"*. Such knowledge relates to understanding of the components and principles of democracy, knowledge of how institutions work, and knowledge of legal and constitutional rules.

Modern democracy has however gone through importance changes and has developed much beyond mere individual participation in voting. In fact, "spaces of participation" have multiplied and various experiments with the democracy are being held (such as the recent Conference on the Future of Europe, and the subsequent European Citizens' Panels – the one on Learning mobility is discussed above – organized by the European Commission).

Hence, rather static knowledge of the institutions and rules is not enough (even if with regard to the EU it has to be admitted that a lot of work remains to be done). Civic and political compe-

tences are not just about acquiring knowledge but equally about practice, practical skills and experience on the ground. Such competences include skills that are closer to a kind of researcher's mindset: identifying and describing information, analysing and explaining information, synthesising information, evaluating, taking position and defending a position, critical thinking and thinking constructively).

It also includes more practical, hands-on capacities, such as participatory skills (interacting with others, being able to monitor public events and issues, communication and deliberative skills, being able to influence decisions, identify self-interests and act upon them, have organizational skills).

And finally, civic and political competences relate to distinctive dispositions or value outlooks, classically referred to as civic culture (recognizing equality and humanity, respecting rights, acting responsibly, promoting the common good).

It needs to be recognized that the actual understanding of civic and political competences is itself political, that is, where do we stand in terms of our views of democracy and citizenship. A type of citizenship, let us call it "broadly responsible" or minimalist, may stress only good, responsible and law-abiding behaviour as important for being a citizen, whereas participatory understandings also put emphasis on being participating in community structures, while "justice oriented" views stress active questioning of the system and trying to counter injustices.

To be effective in a more complete sense as a citizen acquires more than just knowledge, participatory and practical skills, and cultural disposition. It clearly requires, to be successful, social capital or the right networks and it requires resources.

3. Erasmus+: Political and democratic engagement, exclusion and lack of inclusion

Civic and social engagement and participation receive a lot of lip service in European policies, not least in the Erasmus+ programme (as in volunteering, youth internships and work), or also in other programmes, such as the European Solidarity Corps. For the Commission there is a link between civic and political engagement: it holds that democratic participation 'can also be targeted through non-formal learning activities, which aim at enhancing the skills and competences of young people as well as their active citizenship'.

It is, however not clear what this means in practice, that is, it is not evident how civic, community – often very local - engagement actually contributes to **active political awareness, political and human rights literacy**, and the **development of a political sense of European citizenship**. Moreover, as stated in a recent report of the European Parliament Research Service, in Erasmus+'s KA1 – on student and teacher mobility – there is no explicit focus on political citizenship, but participants rather 'experience social and cultural elements of citizenship' (2021: 54), there tends to be less attention for explicit political issues, and there is a lack of a structural, explicit attention to European citizenship.

Hence, **one the core objectives** of PEACE is to discuss and debate, explore, and develop the civic and political dimension – and related dimensions such as political engagement and activism, a critical mindset, and EU political knowledge - and explicitly develop a series of innovative ideas and proposals how civic and political engagement may be stimulated in a range of different but interconnected, more systematic ways.

The PEACE project contributes not only to a more robust development of civic and political training within the Programme, but also engages in more intense reflection and debate on, as well as analysis of crucial political issues within the programme, that is, in relation to inclusion and diversity. These themes include matters of gender bias in Erasmus+ and the relation of the programme to forms of gender inequality. It also relates to the history of European integration, and the role of colonialism in the process. This sounds perhaps as a far stretch, but in fact it relates to European citizens with migrant backgrounds and those tied culturally to colonial or former colonial territories. A further important issue is also the differences between different parts of Europe, not least those between East and West. In particular, in the light of the currently prominent discussion on Enlargement, this is equally of great relevance for Erasmus+.

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Section 2

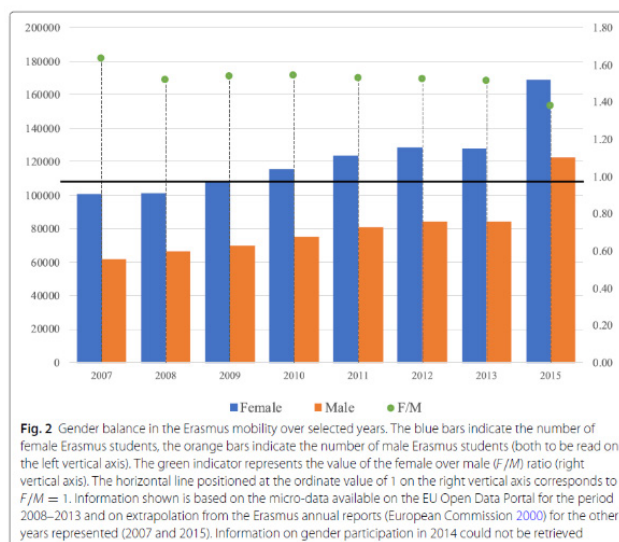
Erasmus+: equality, inclusion, diversity

The collective deliberation consisted in brief introductions to specific topics by two experts, and subsequent deliberative, group discussions – amongst different people involved in the Erasmus+ programme (such as students, Ambassadors, staff from National Agencies, members of the Erasmus Student Network, teachers and educators). The three themes were:

- *gender inequality;*
- *Europe and its colonial past;*
- *East-West distinction.*

Gender equality

Background: The Erasmus+ programme sees the overwhelming participation of women in international mobility. This appears as a positive phenomenon, and we might expect that the over-representation of women would contribute to changes in gender imbalances in the future.



Source: De Benedictis and Leoni 2020: 7.

The Erasmus programme still has a very small number of projects on gender issues (in 2017 estimated 1,2 %).

Reflections: To what extent does the Erasmus programme contribute to gender equality through a) changes in mentality, b) enhanced access to labour markets?

What is the main “push factor” for female students to become mobile? To what extent is it because of lack of opportunity in their home countries? Are there major differences between countries? How should the Erasmus program respond to this?

In general, how does the Erasmus+ programme relate to inclusion, in relation to women (and their social mobility), but regarding (non-Cis) men and people of other gender identities?

Group discussions – gender equality

Key remarks

Women appear as overrepresented in the programme and in education in general.

Female participation reflects the subjects and the priorities of Erasmus+ and of the main projects. Women are more interesting in the priorities of the Erasmus+ Program since they are frequently working in education, often they are mothers, they are more sensitive towards social inclusion.

Significant differences however exist between academic disciplines.

A more inclusive and equal educational system as well as labour market would need to start from primary school education.

One significant problem is the lack of women in leading positions. Problems are cultural (prejudices/stereotypes) as well as economic.

Gender balance in the execution of tasks in the family is an important issue.

Focus should be on all gender types.

Structural problem: there is no specific focus on gender issues in the application form. There should be more structural information, also regarding good practices given by the National Agencies and the program guide.

Role models are very important. Students with for instance autism have almost no role models to see what Erasmus+ can do for them. This would be key in being more inclusive. Representation is key.

Is there a higher interest from male participants to take part into Erasmus job shadowing activities because are more practical?

Discussion statement: The Erasmus programme needs to actively stimulate attitudinal and structural change (access to the labour market, enhance social mobility) for women (but also for non (cis)- male persons).

Europe and its colonial past

Background: While we predominantly think about the European Union as a benevolent European project, with cosmopolitan, progressive, and inclusive overtones, we overlook the past of colonialism and decolonization which is equally part of the process of European integration. In fact, the EEC of 1957 emerged also a response to the idea of safeguarding “Eurafrica”. It equally comes through in the idea of “Eurowhiteness” (the implicit idea of a “original” core to Europe, based on whiteness).

This largely neglected past represents itself however frequently, for instance in the various “woke” and “Black Lives Matter” movements throughout Europe, which are specifically about justice for “postcolonial citizens” or people with migration backgrounds from the Global South.



Source: Kochenov 2011.

Reflections: What do we know about the participation of people with identities tied to the colonial past of Europe (or with a migration background generally) in international mobility? What do we know about equality of opportunity? And what do we know about their experiences?

To what extent should the Erasmus+ programme raise awareness of the colonial past, in particular as a part of the pan-European project?

To what extent is this colonial past part of discussions about European identity? How could Erasmus+ contribute to a more inclusive European identity and the strengthening of sensibility around issues of decolonization and the evident political presence of Europe to this day beyond its own borders?

Discussion statement: Erasmus projects should aim to bring awareness of Europe's colonial past, and its long-term effects that continue until today.

Group discussions – Europe and its colonial past

Key remarks

Mobility for students from North Africa is difficult, due to inter alia visa, bureaucratic challenges, and discrimination regarding religion. Furthermore, such students often have a cultural shock; the impact of this shock depends on where they come from, but they may not have support to realize it and face it.

Erasmus+ should aim to bring awareness of the past and the long-term effects that continue until today.

There are schools that have projects focused on the past and how to be learning from it. Cultural heritage is important to learn from nowadays. Why does the world look the way it does today? What can we learn from this?

It is important to have projects focusing on the past and discuss the more difficult

topics because we need to know where we are coming from to understand the world we live in today. Heritage and experiences are key in education.

It is important to understand the culture and the past of a country so as to better understand the people. This is also inclusion, being open to other cultures. History is part of a country, of a person, of a culture.

European Countries should try to contact ex-colonial countries to collaborate with them. Europe needs to build collaboration with these countries. Erasmus must bring awareness about these topics. Erasmus can bring awareness to these topics starting even from the primary school and we have to start also now, in this room.

In Erasmus, there are cooperation partnerships with non-European institutions (such as Turkish schools), which are highly motivated in joining the Programme.

There is a lack of information about Erasmus+ and its activities among immigrants, and that prevents them from joining the Programme. Erasmus+ is perceived as too elitarian and addressed to a minority of “white” EU people.

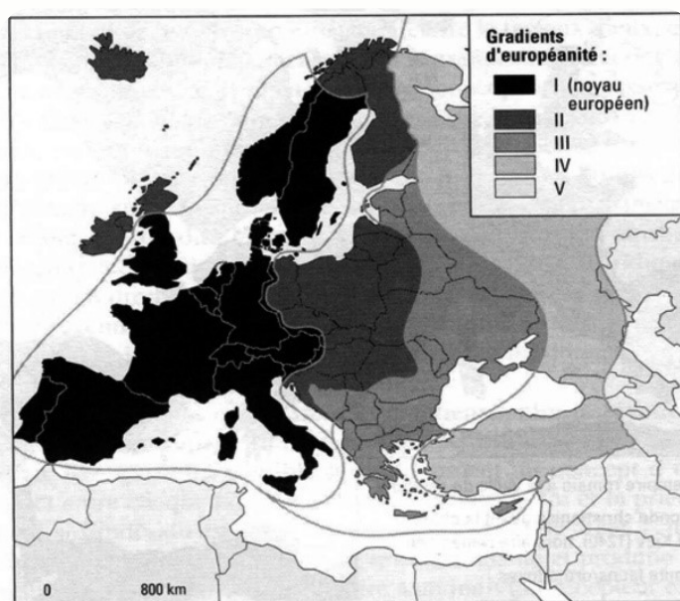
An increasing number of Erasmus opportunities for minority groups should overcome the discrepancy between the daily work and the idealistic vision of the EU.

The East-West distinction

Background: The EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe has united the continent, but arguably there are still major differences between East and West today.

This includes tensions between a “core Europe” and the peripheries. It relates to deeply embedded mentalities and prejudices which tend to represent the East as backwards, backsliding, and generally as different and less developed.

There seem to be still major differences in Eastern and Western European locations, in particular in terms of the former lack of attraction for mobile students.



Students from Eastern Europe may tend to be mobile not just for reasons of curiosity or interest in other cultures, but also out of sheer necessity. There are no opportunities in their countries.

Eastern European students may face forms of discriminating treatment on mobility more than those from Western Europe.

Source: Böröcz 2020: 1127.

Reflections: To what extent does the Erasmus+ programme emphasize and contribute to an overarching European identity that explicitly includes East and Central Europe?

Should participants from Western Europe be more actively encouraged to take exchanges in East and Central Europe? Should East and Central European institutions become more central to the programme?

What is the relation of the Erasmus+ programme to a “brain drain” within the EU?

Discussion statement: The Erasmus+ programme (unwillingly) contributes to imbalances between the West and East.

Group discussions – East-West distinction

Key remarks

Many students from Eastern countries go to Western countries even if life there is really expensive for them. But budget reasons can be a good reason to encourage students to go there.

Also universities are encouraging students to go to Western countries because it is better for their graduation (some universities are more prestigious than others).

One might create more partnerships among Eastern and Western schools, universities, and companies.

There is a general perception that there are “better” institutions in Central and Western Europe. Sometimes students spending their Erasmus mobility in Eastern EU countries have high expectations and focus on the lack of services and infrastructures of the host country rather than the experience itself.

Even if there is a consistent group of Western students that spend their Erasmus in Eastern Europe, the number of Eastern students that decides to move to Western countries after their Erasmus mobility is growing faster. A similar tendency is growing from the South to the North of Europe with a consequent “brain drain”.

National governments of Eastern and Southern EU countries should value Erasmus+ experiences in job selections and adopt incentives for those Erasmus students that want to come back in their home countries after their mobility.

The programme causes imbalances even during the mobilities, some participants can afford to stay and live in the country where there are in mobility. Romanian in Sweden weren't able to pay and live in Malmö for budget constraints. Erasmus programme should face this problem with an extra budget for the people in mobilities that are coming from poorer countries.

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Section 3

“Train the trainers”

The training included brief introductions to specific topics and subsequent deliberative, group discussions – amongst different people involved in the Erasmus+ programme, such as students, Ambassadors, staff from National Agencies, members of the Erasmus Student Network, teachers and educators). The three themes were:

- *youth political and civic engagement;*
- *European citizenship education;*
- *social inclusion, diversity, non-discrimination.*

The participants discussed the main thesis, and subsequently the sub questions. A list of action items was provided (see below) that was used by the table facilitator to aid the discussion.



A group deliberation in Malmö, Sweden.

- *The key objectives of the training are:*
- *Give people a short background and deeper knowledge with regard to civic and political themes in international mobility/Erasmus+ (knowledge).*
- *Help to raise awareness of the multiple civic and political dimensions of the Erasmus+ programme (awareness).*
- *Help develop a critical-constructive view, where participants (alumni, staff, ambassadors) reflect on how they could (also collectively) contribute to further strengthening the civic and political learning effects of international mobility (critical-reflexive mindset).*
- *Help to think how participation and collaboration are about finding harmony and consensus but equally involve agreeing to disagree and dealing with ambiguity (learning to participate).*

Theme 1. Civic and political engagement of youth

a. General facts: youth participation

Young people generally participate less in domestic and European politics. For instance, abstention of the youngest voters in European parliamentary elections is particularly high (over 70%). Young people seem less and less inclined in interacting with institutional politics, and the gap between the younger and older generation is widening. With the upcoming European parliamentary elections in May 2024, this is a major concern. The less young people participate, the less they are represented in politics, and the less governments and European institutions have incentives to create policies that explicitly address the youth's concerns. One "fun fact" is that only around 2 % of parliaments have members that are younger than 30 years old. Important questions emerge: are public spheres and the media sufficiently attuned to young people's needs and interests? Can young people sufficiently contribute to public debate? Are young people developing different, novel relations to politics and the public good, and are they socialized politically in a different way? Are young people exposed sufficiently to education that helps them learning to participate, develop a civic and political consciousness, and transmit core civic and political skills?

b. Reflections:

- *International mobility could play a more important role in stimulating the interest of youth in politics as well as in make evident the importance of their civic and political engagement.*
- *International mobility brings youth into contact with other societies and their problems and may raise awareness of the relevance of the European dimension to democratic politics.*
- *Experience with international mobility also brings out the difficulties of international collaboration and integration, in terms of different norms and cultural understandings, bureaucratic obstacles, difficulties in intercultural communication etc.*

c. Thesis/discussion topic:

The Erasmus+ programme is focussed on improving educational and employment opportunities. In addition, it should strengthen dimensions of promotion of European values, skills of democratic engagement and civic participation.

d. Subquestions

- *What are your personal experiences with regard to political topics and skills in the context of the Erasmus+ programme? Could you name positive as well as negative experiences?*
- *How much do institutions (schools, universities, organizations) pay attention to the civic and political dimensions of international mobility? If they do, how do they do this?*
- *How are political skills enhanced/trained (e.g. debating skills, dealing with conflict, audi alteram partem/learn-to-listen) in international programmes?*
- *Do experiences in international mobility have sufficient room for civic and political issues to be discussed? In other words, are there key moments in which politics and problems with political dimensions are discussed (very straightforward issues such as housing come to mind, but we can also think of how much voice do participants have in how the curricula are shaped or how much freedom do they have in choosing topics/subjects)?*
- *Erasmus+ is clearly about promoting the European integration project and a European awa-*

renew. Should such an awareness not also include engagement with difficult topics, such as war, economic crisis, or the migration crisis (as key problems the EU needs to deal with)?

■ To what extent is Erasmus+ a vehicle for making young people aware of their concerns and helping them to deal with these concerns?

■ When is politics important? Did you ever experience major tensions or disputes between groups of students or between participants?

e. Actions (potential)

- Strengthening students' and or other pan-European networks.
- Create digital platforms that allow for interaction over time.
- Create moments/events in international mobility to collectively reflect on the future of Europe.
- Create moments/events to collectively reflect on difficulties of mobility and European citizenship.
- Reflect on exclusionary dimensions with international mobility.
- How can those with a mobility experience help to mobilize young people back home?
- Is civil society with civic and political missions collaborating?
- Young people can be brought closer to politics by discussing themes of interest: environment (the EU's Green Deal), youth employment and social mobility, migration, artificial intelligence.



A group deliberation in Malmö, Sweden.

Group discussions – Civic/political engagement of youth

Key remarks

The Erasmus+ programme could raise awareness on the positive aspects of being European; in any mobility you should be prepared/informed about some aspects of the civic engagement in Europe.

The Erasmus+ programme could further develop a network of young Ambassadors (in Malmö, there was for instance a group of young Romanian ambassadors that took part in the conference). They could witness their democratic experiences in their life and propose social engagement in their territories. A strict connection with the territories should be encouraged, in order to see the local problems, judge the issues and act for a stronger participation into democratic life (Service Learning).

A “Democracy Ambassador” could aim at: getting youth involved in elections; reaching out to people who will vote for the first time (target groups: youth & immigrants); this framework could work for general political engagement too.

Younger and older generations could exchange memory and historical experiences.

Even if people understand the value of the EU in general (especially when talking with non-EU citizens), the EU system is complex and it needs a lot of effort to educate yourself/ other people.

We need to give students the skills to present and discuss in public, they have to learn how to be heard. It's a practical point of view. Young citizens also need to learn how to build a network and how to participate.

Why do young people not go to vote? The fact that they do not vote says more about adults than about young people themselves: they need to know how to participate, maybe a platform designed to teach them how to participate. It takes a village to raise a child, it takes an entire community to grow a citizen.

Theme 2. European citizenship education

a. General facts

The knowledge of EU institutions of young people (Under30) is uneven across the EU. An EP Youth Survey found that in some countries (e.g. Croatia), only 25 % of the respondents thought to understand a great deal or fair amount about the EU. In others, such as the Netherlands or Belgium, this increases to 31/2 %, while in Portugal 63 % claimed to have fair knowledge. Also, there are differences in male and female responses, the former more confident in their knowledge. A majority of respondents thought not to have influence over important decisions, laws, and policies affecting the EU as a whole.

Beyond factual knowledge about European integration as such, it remains unclear how European core values and policy objectives (such as inclusion, recognition of cultural diversity, minority rights, tolerance, respect for the rule of law) are actually promoted through European policies. This includes the Erasmus+ Programme. A robust form of European citizenship education would need to go beyond a type of “banal cosmopolitanism” that consists in an general, rather superficial intercultural exchange about for instance culturally diverse food, drinks,

typical habits and musical taste. European citizenship education needs to involve the development of civic and political skills, which includes as significant subjective dimension. Thus, citizenship education needs to expand factual knowledge, but also to develop skills in terms of “learning to participate”, dealing with ambiguity, change, and conflict, debating sensitive matters in public, engaging somehow with “taboos”, and discussing dimensions of European integration that do not seem to work. At the same time, this means that European citizenship education ought not to be political in ideological terms, but rather construct a platform and relationships that allow for open debate.

b. Reflections:

- *European citizenship and European civic education are not sufficiently developed, remain scattered and fragmented between member states.*
- *Young people have insufficient knowledge of the EU.*
- *Internationally mobile students would be expected to be more knowledgeable about the EU, but they are hardly so.*
- *International mobility does not in and by itself strengthen European citizenship.*
- *Inter-thematic teaching of citizenship through other courses does not work*
- *EU citizenship education should not be just “celebratory”, but should facilitate critical reflection, also on the EU’s past, making EU citizenship an open, inclusionary concept and create competencies in dealing with conflict and difficult legacies from the past (e.g. colonialism).*

c. Thesis:

The lack of youth participation in European politics calls for a comprehensive development of a European citizenship education as a core and obligatory part of the Erasmus+ programme.

d. Subquestions

- *How are European citizenship, skills and knowledge currently being addressed in the programme/by your institution? Are there sufficient moments for critical reflection and debate? How are European citizenship skills and training being evaluated?*
- *How can the Erasmus experience stimulate sentiments of civic responsibility? To what extent are exchange programmes making participants aware of existing societal problems in the host country? To what extent does international mobility help developing awareness of the importance of common, European solutions?*
- *To what extent are the trends of democracy and rule of law erosion object of debate in study programmes?*
- *Is (or should) all Erasmus+ participants engage in (short) courses on European integration?*
- *Is their comprehensive attention in international mobility (including in lifelong learning) for developing core skills of digital citizenship and in relation to the impact of Artificial Intelligence on democracy and society at large?*
- *How much attention is there in programmes for civic capacities to identify fake news and disinformation, select trustworthy information, and use such information in argumentation?*
- *How aware are participants of current processes of reform of the EU Treaties, the EU’s Green Deal, upcoming European Parliament elections, or new ways of participating in EU*

politics (e.g. European Citizens' Panels)?

- *How much collaboration is there between partner institutions with regard to European citizenship education? Could you mention positive (and negative) experiences in this regard?*
- *To what extent are current programmes and institutions stimulating critical thinking, media literacy, and generally fostering "thinking out of the box"? What do these dimensions mean in practice, do you think (e.g. how can one stimulate critical thinking)?*

e. Actions (potential)

- *EU education must become a mandatory topic, in order to emphasize the importance of integration as well as of international mobility, and to reduce prejudices.*
- *Allocating a specific budget to develop educational programmes on the functioning of the EU and its values that it could propose to the Member States that wish, so that they can integrate them into their curricula (primary, secondary schools, and universities) (proposal 22.4 Conference on the Future of Europe).*
- *Introduce short information events on the upcoming European Parliament elections, helping (young) people to orient in voting.*
- *Citizenship education is often contested due ideological conflicts and forms of polarization. We need to think of a citizenship education that is stimulating participation but does not impose ideological standpoints.*
- *European citizenship education should contain an important environmental dimension, which helps raising environmental awareness. How can this be achieved in practical terms? Are there recommendations regarding international mobility that incentive travel by train for instance?*
- *Specific "democracy ambassadors" could be created to incentivize interest in the civic and political dimensions of the Erasmus+ programme.*

Group discussions – European citizenship education

Key remarks

We should not ask why young people are not actively interested, we have to involve them. The structure of Erasmus must be more addressed to include everyone, especially the students who are more in need to do this kind of activities, not only who is already willing to participate.

A lack of knowledge of the EU might be a bigger problem in smaller towns than in bigger cities.

In France, young people seem not to trust the EU; people feel they do not have a say in (European) politics.

Erasmus+ mobility is about a community and you get easier linked to the EU or feel like an “EU member”.

If you never have been in an international context, it might be difficult to engage with your “EU citizenship”.

It is important to involve the students’/pupils’ families in the debate around active participations to democratic life, by organizing parents’ days and grandparents’ days at school.

The creation of Youth Parliaments in schools could be a form of increasing deliberative decisions concerning school life (homework, free time, different forms of representation). The Youth Parliaments should be held by volunteer students.

Young people think that simple information on EU matters is often difficult to find, the EU should spread information in a “sexy” way (i.e. with Tik Tok).

Theme 3. Social inclusion, diversity, non-discrimination

a. General facts:

The Erasmus+ programme pays attention to two types of inclusion: 1) making the mobility programme itself more inclusive by targeting “people with fewer opportunities” and 2) by stressing the importance for inclusion in society at large. “Fewer opportunities” involve among others social obstacles or barriers due to discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or disability. This may also refer to limited social competences or skills, high-risk behaviour or forms of social marginalisation. Barriers may involve economic barriers, or educational barriers, and cultural differences. A further barrier may be geographical barriers. The various barriers, when coming together, may form intersectional disadvantages, that is, people suffer from various, accumulative obstacles to participate in mobility.

Such barriers are difficult to study and gathering information is in part ethically sensitive. We hence know relatively little about both the inclusiveness of international mobility, nor about how it may contribute to broader social inclusion.

The recent SiEM project of the ESN (2021) has conducted a very valuable survey on inclusion, which found, among the ca. 12.000 students surveyed, that 24% of the participants experien-

ced some form of discrimination while abroad on a mobility programme. Also, almost a third of the respondents from an ethnic minority background reported experiencing discrimination, while only 3% percent of while respondents reported discrimination in relation to race, ethnicity or nationality.

b. Reflections:

- *We currently know little of the diversity of Erasmus participants in terms of ethnic/migrant background.*
- *We know relatively little about specific “less advantaged groups” in international mobility.*
- *The notion of “fewer opportunities” remains rather vague; what does this mean on the ground?*
- *How can we deal better with the phenomenon of intersectionality?*
- *A core focus on barriers – rightly so - is the dimension of financial concerns as a major barrier for people to become internationally mobile. How does this barrier relate to other barriers?*
- *Are there major differences across Europe (East-West; North – South) in terms of how institutions deal with diversity, gender, ethnicity/nationality, and lesser opportunities?*
- *The Erasmus+ programme might be counter-productive with regard to reaching the most difficult groups (those that live in peripheral areas, have socio-economic problems, come from poorer backgrounds). In other words, the “high achievers” are specifically incentivized, while the less mobile are left further behind.*

c. Thesis:

The Erasmus+ programme does not pay sufficient attention to structural forms of exclusion, particularly in the form of intersectional exclusion (different obstacles/barriers experienced by the same person).

d. Subquestions

- *How can we best define “fewer opportunities”, that is, what do such barriers consist of in the Erasmus+ programme?*
- *Do Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and other institutions help to create “safe spaces” for participants? How do they do this?*
- *How can the wide range of “fewer opportunities” be dealt with on the ground?*
- *Are there major differences across Europe (East-West; North – South) in terms of how institutions deal with diversity, gender, ethnicity/nationality, and lesser opportunities?*
- *Is there specific attention for religious identity in international mobility programmes?*
- *Is there specific attention for disability in international mobility programmes?*
- *Is there specific attention for gender identity in international mobility programmes?*
- *Is there specific attention for ethno-cultural identity in international mobility programmes?*
- *How can we deal better with the phenomenon of intersectionality (that is, people suffering from various barriers at the same time)?*
- *Is the absence of specifically targeted policies for people with lesser opportunities an*

important reason for people not engaging in mobility?

- *To what extent is the curriculum at HEIs paying attention to lack of opportunities and forms of potential discrimination?*

e. Actions (potential)

- *Host institutions need to develop their own targeted policy – a Diversity and Inclusion Strategy - for more vulnerable and underrepresented groups that require additional support.*
- *National Agencies have to develop specific inclusion strategies for underrepresented groups.*
- *Specific mobility programmes need to be developed for target groups.*
- *Institutional strategies need to become much more informed about forms of discrimination in and barriers to mobility.*
- *A structural “reach out” programme for groups with “least opportunities” need to be developed and financed.*
- *Student organisations need to develop specific strategies for support for underrepresented/vulnerable groups.*



Group deliberations in Malmö, Sweden.

Group discussions – European citizenship education

Key remarks

In the adult sector, less privileged learners are identified, selected among the ones who have never been abroad or are coming from other, non-EU countries. The project is an opportunity for transformation/change, after the mobility they can work together and are happier. Opportunities should be expanded to people who do not have opportunities, between 18-80 years old, secondary education for those who drop out or who have a diploma in other countries).

The Erasmus programme should reserve a percentage of the number of the grants to people with special needs, socio-economical issues and linguistic problems (dyslexic and so on).

It is important to include minority groups into mobilities abroad and into the Erasmus ambassadors' network. Travelling for study or training is a form of active participation in European democratic life. Mobilities are occasions to learn something new with a practical approach and students appreciate a learning by doing methodology in their education.

The Erasmus programme does not pay enough attention to social inclusion and as a result not all the schools involve marginalized students in Erasmus activities. Each organization involved in Erasmus+ projects should do an analysis of the minority groups inside their institution and of the minority groups' needs, in order to apply for specific activities addressed to the active participation of these groups.

Many students find the Erasmus+ application forms' language too difficult to understand and this prevents them from applying. Many students are disillusioned and frustrated because the project selection is too hard. Since in many countries EU funds cannot cover the number of applications there should be more synergies of funds at EU, national and regional levels.

It is difficult to discuss these topics, when people with fewer opportunities are not here; their voice is not heard; it is missing in a discussion like this; diversity is lacking amongst the participants.

Florence/Italy, January 2024



UNIONE EUROPEA

Erasmus+

Arricchisce la vita, apre la mente.



PARTICIPATION ERASMUS ALUMNI
FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Erasmus+ and the European Elections

Sevilla – 3-5 April, 2024

Author

Paul Blokker

AGENZIA NAZIONALE

ERASMUS+

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Section 1

Introduction

Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement (PEACE) is a Long-Term Action with an original mission: exploring the relation between social and civic engagement, political participation, and European citizenship, on one hand, and the Erasmus+ Programme, on the other. In fact, the priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme include the creation of

opportunities for people's participation in democratic life, social and civic engagement through formal or non-formal learning activities. The focus is put on raising awareness of and understanding the European Union context, notably as regards the common EU values, the principles of unity and diversity, as well as their social, cultural and historical heritage (EC 2023: 10).

This report – the third one in the PEACE Action – ties civic and political engagement, in particular of young people, to the European elections, held between 6 and 9 June, 2024. The report provides deeper background knowledge to the International seminar of PEACE, 'Civic participation and EU values. Make Europe shine!', held in Sevilla, 3-5 April, 2024.

The event took place in the run up to the 2024 European elections, and provided a moment to reflect on how to contribute to stimulate young people to vote in these highly important elections. The report also provides some preliminary data from an international youth survey developed in the context of PEACE: 'You(th) and the 2024 European elections', which started in early March, 2024 and was closed on 10 June, right after the elections. The survey for young European citizens sought to understand young people's real interest in European issues and to get to know their needs in depth, with the idea that they might become part of the European political agenda. The short survey addressed young Europeans aged 16 to 35 years old to understand their point of view. Participation was voluntary and completely anonymous. The key points of the questionnaire were youth issues, such as problems with housing, youth unemployment and precarity on the job market, as well as the rising costs of living. In general, the survey wanted to understand better what young people think about the European elections and the European Union. The survey was filled out by 2,297 respondents, in particular from young people in Italy, but also from a range of other European countries, not least Germany, France, Spain, and Poland.

The first part of the report provides an in-depth discussion of the current democratic situation in Europe, in particular in relation to forms of youth engagement with politics. It stresses the importance of the higher turnout, not least of young people, in the 2019 European elections, but it also stresses the importance of existing problems that keep young people from participating and voting. One of such a problem is the structural gap in representation of young people in formal political institutions. In fact, many democratic societies appear as 'gerontocracies', where older people are in charge. The discussion proceeds with an analysis of the attitudes of young people to democracy, highlighting a rather widespread detachment and alienation from formal politics (providing some primary data from our survey to illustrate this). The dimension of youth participation is analysed, showing a more complex picture, in which young people may feel distant from formal politics, but this does not mean that they do not engage. They rather engage in alternative ways. This is subsequently linked to the dimension of inter-

national mobility, and its role in stimulating engagement, political awareness, and a critical mindset. Using again data from our survey, it is shown that young people who have experience in international mobility tend to value democracy various of its facets more. At the end of the first section, the 2024 European elections, also with the benefit of being able now to discuss some of its results. Where the increase in turnout seems to have lasted also in 2024, this is not necessarily having the political effects some had hoped for. If young people are generally understood as more open to European integration, and to have a more open-minded view, at this point in time, there are some clear indications that in some core EU member states, such as France and Germany, significant amounts of young people (under-24) voted for the radical right. This is clearly a dimension the PEACE project might want to look into further. What role might Erasmus+ play in the future to address this challenge?

The second part reports on the deliberative discussion groups that were held in Sevilla, with small groups of different participants (staff from National Agencies, alumni, ambassadors, teachers, academic experts). The discussion groups focussed on two broad themes, Learning mobility and European elections and Youth and under-representation. Some of the main take-aways from the discussions are:

- The Erasmus+ programme provides an excellent impulse for young people's engagement, but would also need strengthening in terms of a more structured focus on the development of democratic and political skills;
- Inclusion needs to remain a core objective, focussing on different kinds of exclusion and different types of minorities;
- It would need further consideration whether civic and political engagement should become mandatory elements in the programme as such, as a specific, formal objective of participants;
- The underrepresentation of young people is a reality¹; Erasmus+ could help with making young people more aware of this, while also providing the relative skills and competences to attempt to address this. Underrepresentation means less intention to participate. It is hence of great importance that young people mobilise in order to make their voice heard and to demand their legitimate inclusion in formal politics.

¹ In fact, one recent journalistic investigation argues that 'The generation of the crisis, Erasmus and the Euro, generation rent and the Fridays for Future generation, have no voice in Brussels', see https://www.europeandatajournalism.eu/cp_data_news/brussels-shuts-the-door-on-diversity-a-european-parliament-without-young-people-and-minorities/.

Section 2

Young people, political engagement, and the European elections

1. Democratic erosion

Democratic societies in Europe seem to be changing rapidly. Various trends are worrisome, such as consistent lower voter turnout and high absenteeism as well as an increase in votes for radical political parties and movements. Political parties seem less and less able to represent citizens and also to form government coalitions².

What is more, authoritarian tendencies are evident in various countries while the influence of external actors with anti-democratic ideas is tangible. That also the European Union is affected by democratic erosion is – amongst others - made clear by several scandals regarding the European Parliament related to extra-European attempts to infiltrate European democracy³.

Democracies are further increasingly characterized by intense forms of conflict, as exemplified by various protest movements of recent years (e.g. the *Gillets Jaunes* protests in France or the environmentalist manifestations of civil disobedience of, for instance, *Extinction Rebellion* or *Ultima Generazione*) or the recent farmers' protests in Brussels and various European countries. In relation to the European Union, democratic societies seem increasingly split between pro-European and anti-European opinions and related political forces.

In relation to democratic politics, it has often been argued that young people seem particularly disengaged and alienated from politics. In fact, many have argued that young people seem disproportionately disaffected, and little engaged with public and political processes. Some facts seem to demonstrate this. For instance, in the Dutch elections mentioned earlier (footnote 2), the turnout of young people was lower than the preceding national elections (a drop from ca. 80 to 73 percent)⁴.

Moreover, some observers indicate tendencies of youth voting for more extreme political parties, with potential anti-democratic implications (see also below). Such trends may clearly be relevant for the European level too, as projections for the 2024 European elections indicated the probability of right-wing and radical right-wing parties (not infrequently with anti-EU and anti-democratic stances) gaining significantly (see Cunningham et al. 2024), which in fact happened.

In contrast, however, it equally needs to be recognized that in some instances the opposite is true (and hence, that a rather significant volatility in voting behaviour should not be excluded). For instance, in the 2019 European elections, trends of democratic erosion and disengagement seemed to be contrasted not least by a relatively higher turn-out of young people. According to a post-election Eurobarometer survey, an increase in turnout of 14 percent of young people up to 25 years of age, and a 12 percent increase of those between 25 to 39 years old importantly affected the overall turnout for the European Parliamentary elections (EPRS 2019: 2) (see table 1).

2 In Europe, a pertinent example is the Netherlands, where after the general elections in November 2023, the new government was formed only in July 2024, after long and interrupted deliberations.

3 A recent example regards Russian attempts to infiltrate European democracy and spread Russian propaganda. In a call to counter foreign interference, the European Parliament has adopted a resolution against the corruption of MEPs in relation to Russian propaganda, see <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240419IPR20542/meps-call-for-a-firm-response-to-counter-russian-interference>.

4 See <https://nos.nl/op3/artikel/2498984-minder-jongeren-naar-de-stembus-dit-is-hoe-zij-stemden>.

Table 1 – Turnout in European elections 2019

Q European Parliament elections were held on the (DATE ACCORDING TO COUNTRY).
For one reason or another, some people in (OUR COUNTRY) did not vote in these elections.
Did you yourself vote in the recent European Parliament elections (% - EU)

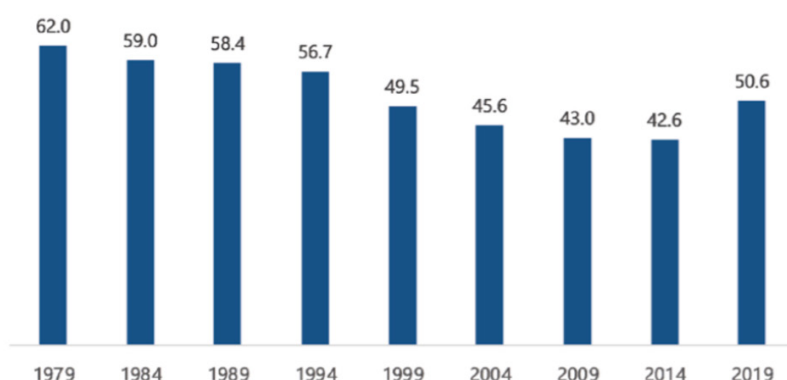
	Voted 2014	Voted 2019	Diff. '19-'14
EU28	43	51	8
Gender			
Man	45	52	7
Woman	41	49	8
Age			
16/18-24	28	42	14
25-39	35	47	12
40-54	45	52	7
55 +	51	54	3

Source: EPRS/Eurobarometer 2019 (91.5), QG1.

Young people contributed to an increase in the overall turn-out, which was 50.6 percent in 2019, the highest since 1994 (see table 2)⁵. This clearly interrupted a trend of decline since the 1989 elections.

Table 2 – Turnout in European elections 1979-2019

Q Evolution of voter turnout for the European election. 1979 - 2019.
(% - EU)



Source: EPRS/Eurobarometer 2019 (91.5).

In terms of political preferences, in the 2019 elections, younger people (18-28 years of age) voted more frequently for the Greens, the Centre-Left, and the Centre-right conservative European People's Party (the predominant preference of voters above 58 years of age)⁶. Also the Polish general elections in October 2023 showed a high turnout of young voters which decidedly changed the political outcome, against the incumbent populist, conservative government.⁷

⁵ It should however also be noticed that there remains a gap in voter turnout between those under and those above 40 years of age (EPRS 2019: 22).

⁶ See <https://europeelects.eu/2019/06/03/how-different-generations-voted-in-the-eu-election/>.

⁷ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/21/young-voters-who-shaped-poland-election-result>.

The views of young people are significant also because research on political socialisation indicates that most people form their basic political views between the ages of 12 and 25, while these basic views remain rather stable afterwards (Rekker and van der Brug 2022). In this regard, it is equally important to note that research demonstrates that young people tend to be generally more in support for European unification than older generations (Rekker and van der Brug 2022). An analysis of generational differences in the Netherlands found that citizens who came of age after 1992 tend to support EU integration on the basis of socio-cultural attitudes to issues such as migration, stressing the importance of the EU as a cultural and political, and not just an economic, project (Rekker and van der Brug 2022: 457-58).

2. Gaps in representation

An important factor that makes young people estranged from formal, institutional politics is their extensive under-representation in parliaments and governments. In this regard, parliaments in most democratic countries tend to be made up of the more affluent, are more male-based, and have more middle-aged and more white-collar professionals as members (Stockemer and Sundstrom 2022: 1). In fact, young people as well as other groups tend to be starkly underrepresented, and experts claim that several of the larger democracies are 'real gerontocracies' (Stockemer and Sundstrom 2022: 2).

In this, young people are generally disadvantaged politically (Dezelan, Bacalso, Lodeserto 2023: 9). They are not equally represented in formal political institutions and are hence importantly under-represented in processes of policy-making and democratic representation. Young people can be understood as an 'excluded majority', even if roughly half of the world's population is currently under the age of 35 (Stockemer and Sundstrom 2022: 1). A rather extreme case is the United States, where politics is dominated by white, senior, male politicians. Young people are hence under-represented and the political representation of their age group and main concerns is defective. In terms of 'descriptive representation, parliaments and other political fora does not have sufficient young people 'present' to represent the larger younger generations. This could lead to a 'vicious cycle of political alienation', seeing young people increasingly distanced from formal politics (this in part also explains the turn to non-conventional political action, as with environmental protests, which in various European countries are however criminalized by the formal political and legal institutions). It may further involve 'declining political sophistication of the young, their waning (conventional) participation, and their insufficient representation in political office' (Stockemer and Sundstrom 2022: 4).

In Europe, young people make up circa 15 to 20 percent of the entire population, but less than 3 percent of national parliaments have members that are under the age of 30, with young women being around 1 % (Dezelan, Bacalso, Lodeserto 2023: 8). In fact, in the current European Parliament, only 37 members are under 35, which corresponds to ca. 5 %. The average age is ca. 50 years old.

3. Youth attitudes to democracy

Various surveys and research projects indicate that young people are relatively less satisfied with democracy than older generations, and youth satisfaction with democracy appears globally on the decline. This indicates also a growing interest of young people in populist and

autocratic political positions (Foa et al. 2020: 2). Important differences between regions – for instance, between Western and Eastern Europe – have been pointed out. While older generations in Western Europe appear to become more satisfied with democracy, younger generations are increasingly less so, with millennials being least satisfied. In Eastern Europe, in contrast, with various generations becoming somewhat more satisfied with democracy over time (Foa et al. 2020: 15).

In general, young people seem to express similar concerns across the board, that is, they feel distanced from democratic politics, and tend to articulate political concerns in alternative ways, such as protests regarding the climate. Young people seem to generally appreciate democracy in principle but perceive formal politics as providing little benefits for young people and too little oriented towards youth issues (Bristelle et al. 2024: 11). A report from the Foundation of European Progressive Politics (FEPS) found – inter alia - the following policy issues insufficiently addressed by formal politics (Bristelle et al. 2024: 12):

- Youth unemployment
- Job insecurity
- Regional inequality
- Cost of living
- Housing and accommodation crisis

The views of democracy of young people includes (Bristelle et al. 2024: 12-13):

- The feeling not being listened to
- A lack of trust in politicians (seen as too often corrupt and self-interested, and inapproachable)
- A feeling of disconnection from institutions
- Formal politics as too little concerned with issues that affect (young) people in their daily lives (including climate change)
- Institutional communication often not understandable and too technocratic

Some of these concerns are equally articulated in the PEACE survey “You(th) and the 2024 European elections”, where ca. 250 young people out of a total of 2297 respondents indicated that they would not vote in the 2024 European Parliamentary elections and expressed explicit unease in response to the question “Why do you think the European Parliament elections are not important?”:

I did not say that. Voting is important but I think my single vote will not have an impact

Because they [the European Parliament] don't have any power or possibility to do anything, the real decisions are taken by European Commission, European Parliament is quite useless

I think they are very important, but as a young Italian person I believe my voice doesn't matter at all

European Parliament is too weak to truly make the difference, national elections are still where real changes are made

The majority of Italian people have a political opinion that goes against democracy, but, since they are the majority of voting people, it's their vote that will be effectively listened

European politicians do not listen to people like me, I'm not convinced by any politician, I've lost trust in the system. Too many promises and then no concrete facts. We are and remain poor

In the last EU election, Ursula von der Leyen was not listed on any voting ballots but was still put into the position of President of the European Commission. That shows that the most influential position of the EU is not given by a democratic vote but rather by politicians' backroom deals

I feel like the people that my country votes into the European Parliament are the ones that are unwanted in the national parliament (because of scandals etc). Additionally, I've read reports from a former member of the European Parliament that decisions are rigged with corruption

The parliament cannot suggest new laws. Therefore, it does not have a lot of power to begin with. Furthermore, the last "president" Ursula von der Leyen was kind of pre-voted by other people and is not a good politician. And lobbies have too much power

My agency, as an individual, is limited to my micro local world. I don't have the agency to change all this bullshit such as the militarisation, environmental changes, social disparities, precariat, etc.

In the end global corporations will decide in what way EU politics will go

One vote in 300 million is never important

4. Youth participation

In general, young people have been losing trust in political institutions, are less interested in party membership, and are underrepresented in party bodies (Dezelan, Bacalso, Lodeserto 2023: 8). Since at least two decades, we see a decline in interest of young people in formal politics. Obviously, such decline is not even across different segments of the youth, and is related to socio-economic standing, education, geographical location, and other factors (Dezelan, Bacalso, Lodeserto 2023: 8). Young people with disadvantages face much greater challenges in terms of feeling represented by formal politics and perceiving political opportunities. In particular, the so-called NEET (not in employment, education, or training) category faces structural exclusion from social, political and professional life. For young people experience intersectional forms of exclusion, economic constraints, and the perception of not being represented feeds into profound disillusionment with politics (Bristelle et al. 2024).

A structural trend is that the interest of young people in democratic politics is declining, and young people participate much less in institutional politics than older generations. This is in direct contrast to how young people are affected by politics in terms of socio-economic possibilities, job security, housing, and future outlook. Various recent crises have affected young people disproportionately, such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the economic crises, while future prospects look dim, with the increasing evidence of rising costs of living and deterioration in their quality of life, the evermore evident environmental crisis as well as the tense geopolitical situation.

In contrast to the argument that young people are generally disengaged, various experts claim that young people are rather engaging differently in politics (Lavizzari 2021: 53). In recent years, young people's engagement through individual and collective forms of action in for instance social movements has increased. Forms of unconventional political participation consists in forms of participation that are neither institutional nor electoral (Barta, Boldt, Lavizzari 2021), but rather involve activism and 'do-it-ourselves politics'. Unconventional political participation includes political consumerism, political art or activism, or online forms of activism (Lavizzari 2021: 54), but also forms of civil disobedience, such as in environmental protests. One significant dimension is the increased transnational character of youth movements (Lavizzari 2021: 56), such as in Extinction Rebellion or Fridays for Future. It would be interesting to explore whether and to what extent such a transnational tendency maybe related to forms of cross-border mobility.

5. Cross-border mobility

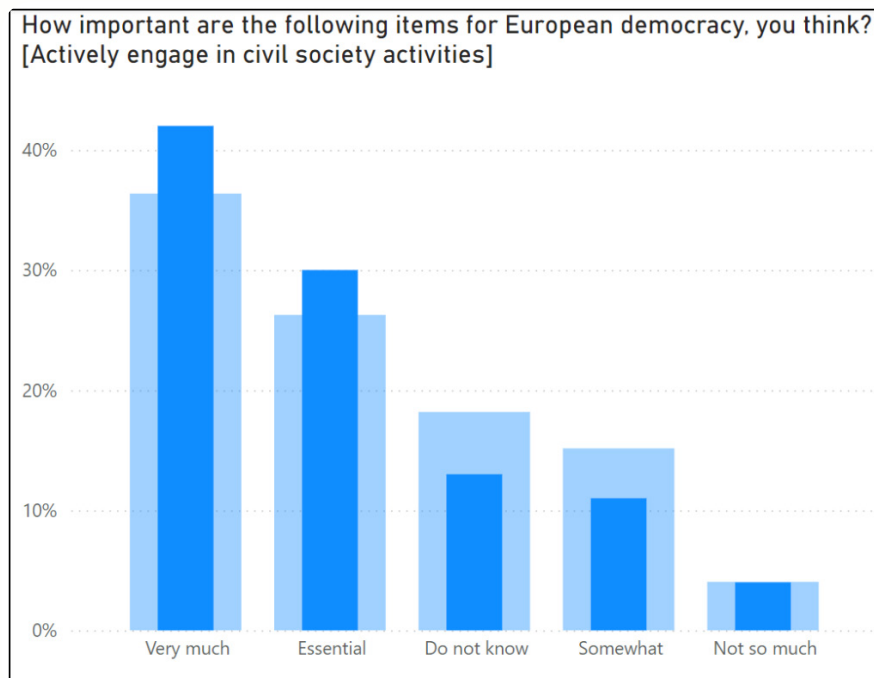
It is often presupposed that international educational mobility of young people strengthens feelings of European identity and may increase young people's perception of being European citizens (Mazzoni et al. 2018). Mobility for longer periods (at least a number of months) may enhance linguistic capacities, as well as affect individual autonomy, organizational, communicative, and networking skills, and enhance reflexive and critical thinking. Mobility may further affect attitudes regarding nationality and feelings of belonging and stimulate a more multi-faceted view of Europe and the EU (Mazzoni et al. 2018: 327).

Yet, some scholars point out the limited evidence for a robust relation between intra-European mobility and the development of European citizenship (Siklodi 2020: 155). Intra-European mobility does directly relate to a rather instrumental dimension of EU citizenship, including rights and benefits from EU membership (mobility, Euro, Erasmus). This may mean that feelings and appreciations of EU citizenship remain rather temporary (Siklodi 2020: 158). But there may be dimensions that are more long-lasting and have to do with a specific political identity, such as the appreciation of the EU as protecting rights of sexual minorities. According to Siklodi (drawing on her research based on focus groups with both mobile and non-mobile young people), the weakest link between mobility and EU citizenship is that of participation. To a large extent, European participation seems reduced to voting in the European elections, while abstention of young people remains a significant problem (see below).

Our 2024 European election survey shows a more optimistic picture. Of the young people who indicated an Erasmus mobility experience, a relatively higher percentage thought actively engaging in civil society activities is important for European democracy (figure 1). Also regarding the importance of mobility stimulating social engagement outside of education and work was more

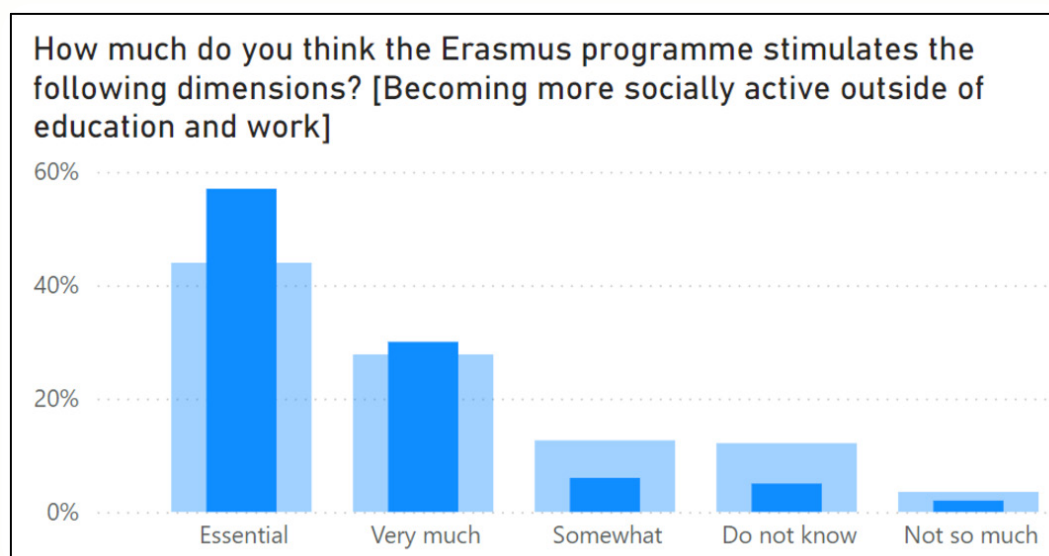
frequently deemed important by young people with a mobility experience (figure 2). For other dimensions, such as intentionality to vote in the European elections, or the importance of civil society in general, there is a large support among young people in general (figures 3 and 4).

Figure 1 – Importance of civil society for European democracy



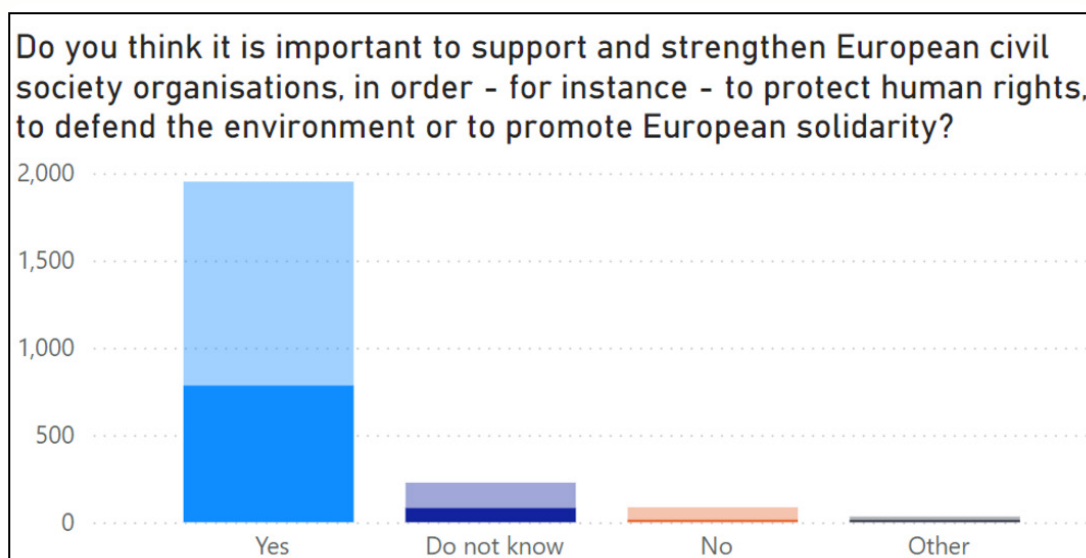
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Figure 2 – Importance of Erasmus+ for social engagement



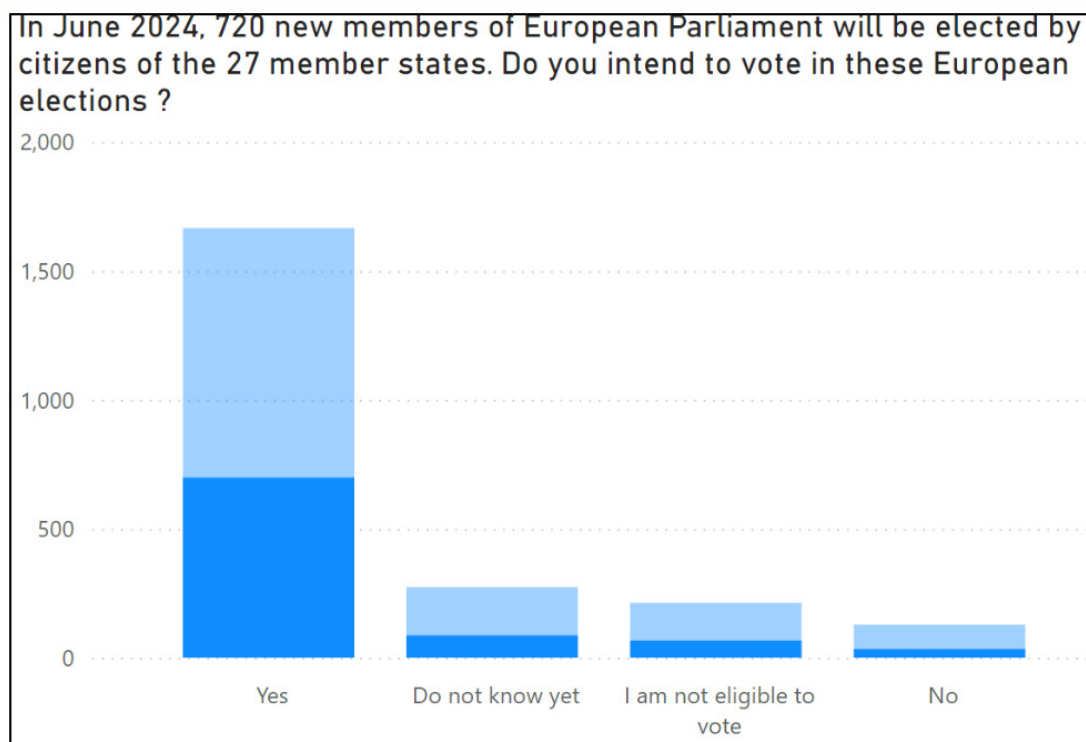
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Figure 3 – Importance of civil society organisations



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Figure 4 – Intention to vote in 2024 European elections



N=2297.

6. Youth and the 2024 European elections

The European elections of 2019 have been widely seen as a major change in terms of participation, in particular by young people. As stated in the European Parliament's 2019 Post-Electoral Survey, the 'overall turnout at the recent European Parliament elections [in 2019] was 50.6%. This is the highest turnout since the 1994 elections and is a striking increase from 2014 (when the turnout was 42.6%)' (EP 2019: 7). A good part of this higher turnout was due to young people coming out to vote: 'Although the turnout in 2019 was higher among all groups of the population, the increase was led by the younger generation, with large increases among people aged under 25 (+14 pp) and aged 25–39 (+12 pp)' (EP 2019: 7).

As mentioned above, a frequently expressed assumption, also corroborated in surveys⁸, is that young people tend to vote in a more pro-European way. In 2019, they clearly also supported environmental issues disproportionately. As stated in the presentation of the survey, the 'study specifically shows the impact younger voters had on turnout, topics and results: +14 pp among those aged under 25 and +12 pp among 25 to 39 year olds. A sense of civic duty, mentioned by 52% of respondents, has become more ingrained in Europeans when they think about European Parliament elections, while increasingly favourable views of the EU have also impacted on voter turnout'.⁹

However, as observed in the context of the 2024 European elections, while young people generally take a positive view of the European Union, they are nevertheless less motivated to vote than older generations¹⁰. Moreover, as is emerging from the analysis of the results of the 2024 European elections - where turnout was roughly the same as in 2019 - a higher turnout among young people can also lead to a larger portion of votes for the radical, Eurosceptic right.

This is particularly clear in Germany, where the voting age was lowered to 16 years in 2024, while in the age group 16-24 a not negligible portion of voters (16%; a number similar to that of older generations) voted for the radical right. Ironically, lowering the voting age had been pushed for in particular by the Greens, while centre-right and radical right were against. The Greens however lost most in the 2024 elections. Also in France, as well as other countries such as Poland, a relatively large number of young people voted for the radical, Eurosceptic right in the 2024 elections.

As argued by some analysts, the youth vote is affected by the constant crises young people have been living through in recent years. The radical right is more prominently present on social media (where most young people get their political information from). Young people in Germany, for instance, seem now less worried about climate change, and more about inflation, housing and living costs, and migration¹¹. In early 2024, a youth survey in Germany was held which showed that among young people there is a significant "frustration with the government"¹².

8 See <https://eupinions.eu/de/blog/the-youth-vote>.

9 See <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019-european-elections-entered-a-new-dimension>.

10 See <https://eupinions.eu/de/blog/the-youth-vote>.

11 See <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/how-far-right-gained-traction-with-europes-youth-2024-06-13/>; <https://www.rnd.de/politik/ergebnisse-der-europawahl-2024-warum-junge-leute-weniger-gruen-waehlen-ZZ054HIJ-DBFBPGFSN6J4EPHV5E.html>.

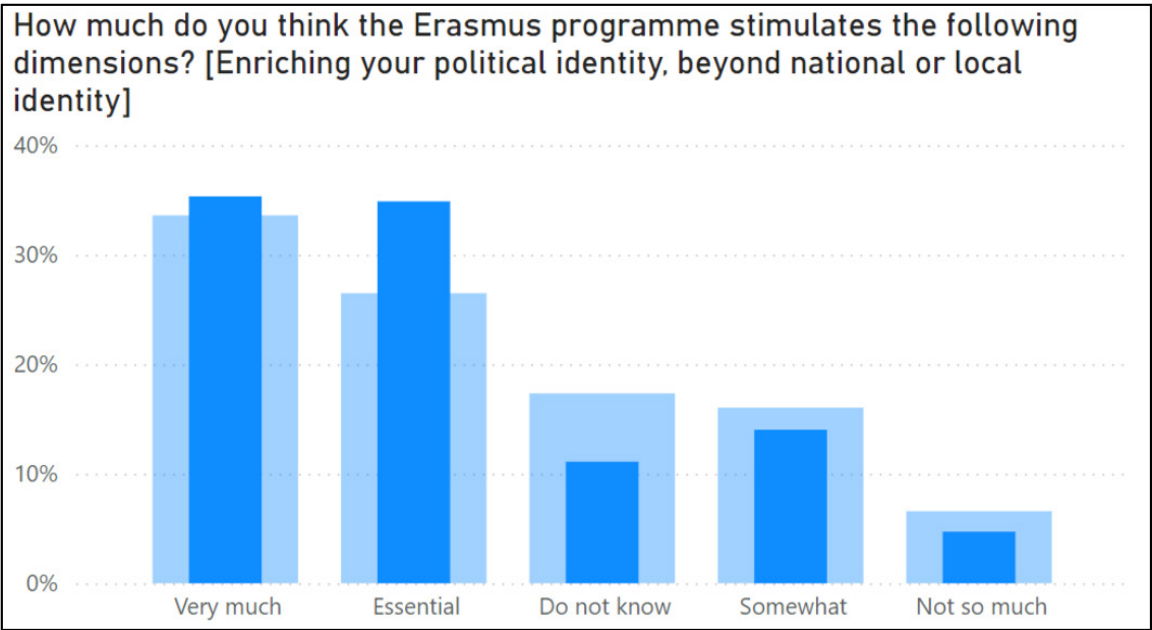
12 See <https://www.rnd.de/politik/ergebnisse-der-europawahl-2024-warum-junge-leute-weniger-gruen-waehlen-ZZ054HIJDBFBPGFSN6J4EPHV5E.html>.

Young people indicated dissatisfaction with the three governing parties, while showing more appreciation for centre-right, conservative, and radical right parties (Schnetzer, Hampel and Hurrelmann 2024: 22). From a comparison with a preceding youth study in 2019, it appears that German young people seem to have become more nationalist and increasingly perceive migration as threatening their social status and families.

This overall picture of German youth is in stark contrast to surveys with young people who have had an experience with international mobility. As found in an extensive survey with young people by DAAD, a large majority of respondents claims that their experience abroad has increased their understanding of people with a migration background back home¹³. While the DAAD survey runs up to 2020, our own PEACE survey, held from early 2024 until the European elections, shows similar results. For instance, the question of whether they thought an Erasmus+ experience had enriched their political identity, beyond local and national identities, those with an experience in international mobility responded slightly more positively than the overall set of respondents (figure 5).

A crucial question is hence how Erasmus+ may reach out to those young persons who feel alienated from, or abandoned by, politics and society, and contribute to the development of a more positive (but critical) engagement with individual and collective projects. While the survey has given highly insightful results, it is likely that there has been a predominance of youth with a positive attitudinal bias towards democracy and European integration. A complex issue is how to speak to and solicit also those who are less positive.

Figure 5 – Erasmus+ and political identity



N=2297.

13 See https://www.daad-brussels.eu/files/2024/05/E_FollowUp_geschuetzt.pdf. Note that this is for the period 2014-2019.

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Section 2

Deliberative learning on Erasmus+ and elections

The Sevilla event included a section on deliberative learning in the form of discussion groups, with mixed composition. The discussion groups focussed on two angles around the general theme of the European Parliamentary Elections:

1. Learning mobility and European elections;
2. Youth and under-representation

The main moderator introduced the topic, articulated a number of reflections on the themes, and provided some key “trade-offs” for discussion. The participants then – in the form of small groups of ca. 10 persons – discussed the main two contrasting positions, by choosing one of the two positions and justifying their position. Facilitators stimulated the discussion with the aid of the further questions and information provided. The discussion per theme lasted ca. 30/45 minutes.

The key objectives of the discussion groups were:

- To give people a short background and deeper knowledge with regard to civic and political themes in international mobility/Erasmus+ (knowledge), in particular in relation to the elections.
- To help raise awareness of the multiple civic and political dimensions of the Erasmus+ programme (awareness).
- To help develop a critical-constructive view, where participants (alumni, staff, ambassadors) reflect on how they could (also collectively) contribute to further strengthening the civic and political learning effects of international mobility (critical-reflexive mindset) and stimulate engagement.
- To help think how participation and collaboration are about finding harmony and consensus but equally involve agreeing to disagree and dealing with ambiguity (learning to participate).

1. The deliberative working groups

The first theme regarded learning mobility and the European elections, with a particular focus on how Erasmus+ can contribute to stimulating engagement amongst young people.

Young people generally participate less in domestic and European politics. For instance, abstention of the youngest voters in the European parliamentary elections is particularly high (for 2019, over 60% for the 16-24 age group whereas the general turnout was roughly above 50%)¹⁴.

Young people seem less and less inclined to interact with institutional politics, and the gap between the younger and older generation is widening.

With the upcoming European parliamentary elections in June 2024, this is a major concern. The less young people participate, the less they are represented in politics, and the less governments and European institutions have incentives to create policies that explicitly address the youth's concerns. One “fun fact” is that only around 2 % of parliaments have members that

¹⁴ For 2024, numbers are not yet available.

are younger than 30 years old, a dynamic that will probably get worse if youth participation continues to decline.

What may be the role of learning mobility and Erasmus+ in stimulating civic and political **engagement**? Erasmus+ has as one of its four priorities engagement. It is, however, not clear what this means in practice. It is not evident for instance how civic, community – often very local - types of engagement actually contribute to active political awareness, political and human rights literacy, and the development of a political sense of European citizenship. Moreover, in Erasmus+, there is no explicit focus on political citizenship, but participants rather ‘experience social and cultural elements of citizenship’ (2021: 54), and there is a lack of a structural, explicit attention to European citizenship.

Therefore, examining the role of learning mobility programs like Erasmus+ in fostering civic and political engagement becomes really important. However, as we shall see in the following survey findings, understanding the practical implications and effectiveness of such initiatives remains a complex and nuanced endeavour.

Theme1. Learning mobility and European elections

Contrasting positions	
1. <i>“There is no need to change Erasmus+ as it is. Learning mobility and Erasmus+ currently contribute sufficiently to participants’ political and democratic skills and willingness to engage. And Erasmus+ is currently sufficiently inclusive. Everybody can participate.”</i>	2. <i>“Learning mobility and Erasmus+ need a much more intense focus on participants’ political and democratic skills and willingness to engage, not least by developing new tools and programmes strengthening a European idea politics. Also, Erasmus+ needs to involve more marginalized young people.”</i>

Position-taking by participants	
(participants choose one of the two positions above and justify their position; the facilitator can help, also by referring to the questions below)	
<i>In what ways does Erasmus+ currently explicitly develop skills of engagement and of political awareness?</i> <i>Can you give explicit examples of how an Erasmus+ activity has enhanced political and civic skills of participants?</i>	<i>To what extent does learning mobility stimulate engagement?</i> <i>How does learning mobility make (young) people more aware (explicit examples) European politics (that is different from national politics)?</i> <i>How could Erasmus+ develop more robust engagement tools to favour transnational civic participation (on the European level)?</i>

Below, we discuss some of the results that emerged in the various discussion groups. We divided the discussions in some common themes that emerged as a response to the input provided (see above, Theme 1).

Erasmus+ and (political) participation



In one working group, participants agreed that the Erasmus+ experiences represent a great contribution in developing good communication skills, linguistic skills, soft skills, and issues regarding European citizenship and values. Many Erasmus+ projects also include a focus on civic matters, regarding for instance inclusion and prejudices.

As a whole, however, participants said, the Programme should focus more

on the development of political and democratic skills. The development of political and democratic skills might be integrated in the curriculum of students participating in the mobility schemes. Compulsory modules on EU institutions were suggested as an example of possible actions to be integrated.

The working group suggested that, before leaving, the sending institution could organize sessions on the four transversal priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme to help students developing further the “human aspect” of the mobility experience but also entering more into the specific issues addressed by the Programme.

A core issue, which many participants mentioned, and which is not necessarily a problem of Erasmus+ only is that young people seem less interested in politics in general and alienated by formal political processes. One dimension that education and international mobility could develop further is fostering an interest in (European) politics and helping young people to understand why politics is important and relevant for them.

Erasmus+ and equal inclusion

In one working group, there was agreement that students who engage and participate in democratic life and, subsequently, in mobility schemes, are generally the more privileged ones, thus, the disadvantaged groups should be involved more into participation.

Erasmus+ and social embeddedness

The group suggested that the Erasmus+ mobility could include also extra activities (as a way for students to give back to the hosting community). For example, students in mobility, could go to schools to talk about their experience, the European Union, the Erasmus+ Programme

etc., thus giving back some added EU value to their mobility. Generally speaking, civic engagement could actively enter the mobility scheme as a kind of mandatory activity. Learning of the hosting country language is also a plus because it helps integrating into the social texture and/or facilitating the civic engagement.



Erasmus+ and different disciplines

A participant mentioned that the Programme should be more appealing for students involved in a science or technical path (i.e. engineer and such) since they often feel distant from the goals of the Programme.

Tutors (before during and after the mobility experience) are considered very useful to help students approaching the experience in a broader and more integrated way (the 4 Erasmus+ priorities for instance) as well as for practical academic issues.

Theme 1

Group discussions – Erasmus+ and participation (in elections)

Some of the key remarks

More economic inclusion and inclusion of rural areas needed. However, mindset in rural areas makes Erasmus inclusion harder.

This is more of a social problem not so much an Erasmus problem: Erasmus is already very inclusive, even to non-EU participants.

There are other initiatives like EP ambassador schools because Erasmus is not doing enough in this regard.

Not being interested in politics is an active choice.

If young people feel represented, they are happier to vote. There is a need to skip the curriculum in schools and instead inform pupils on participation and voting.

[With] Jean Monnet [being] a part of Erasmus+ - it is enough as it is, the learning mobilities may not be, but with JM [it is] enough.

The second theme focussed on youth and the representation of young people in politics. European citizens have the right to vote in the European Parliament elections held every five years. By participating in elections, citizens can choose their representatives (Members of the European Parliament) who will shape EU policies and legislation. Every citizen of the Union has also the right to stand as a candidate in elections to the European Parliament.

Eligibility criteria for voting in European Parliament elections vary slightly between Member States. In general, EU citizens who are at least 18 years old and reside in an EU Member State have the right to vote in the European Parliament elections. In some Member States it is also possible for non-national EU citizens to vote if they meet certain residency requirements.

One issue with young people and the EP is that only in a few member states allow people under 18 allowed to vote. For the 2024 elections, this age is set at 16 in Austria, Belgium, Germany and Malta, 17 in Greece, while it remains 18 in the remaining Member States.

As mentioned, there is a clear representation gap that regards youth representation. The average age of MEPs is 50 years. Two-out-of-three MEPs are 41 to 60-years old. Currently only 37 MEPs – out of 705 – are under the age of 35, around five percent of all parliamentarians. This shows a large gap with the percentage of under-35s in the entire EU population (ca. 16 %) and means young people's main issues, problems and policy preferences are not well-represented in the European Parliament. More under-35 MEPs would mean more potential spokespersons for the causes of young people. It might also enhance trust in the EP by young people at large.

Despite efforts to enhance youth engagement, the broader representation gap remains glaring. As we analyse the survey data pertaining to voting behaviour and aspirations for candidacy among European youth, we gain valuable insights into the extent of youth involvement in sharing European policies and legislation.

Theme2. Youth and under-representation

Contrasting positions: Voting age	
1. <i>"The general voting age of 18 years is fine, as this is the age that young people become adults and become politically competent. The 16-years-old are not yet capable of understanding political issues".</i>	2. <i>"The voting age should be lowered everywhere to 16 years of age. This will enhance the engagement and representation of young people".</i>

Position-taking by participants	
(participants choose one of the two positions above and justify their position; the facilitator can help, also by referring to the questions below)	
<i>What are young people lacking in political and voting skills?</i> <i>What are the main differences between adolescents and adults?</i> <i>At what age are the democratic and political values of people (also regarding the EU's fundamental values) being formed?</i>	<i>What can be the contribution of young people under 18 to (European) politics and civic engagement?</i> <i>What may be the positive outcomes of a minimal voting age of 16?</i> <i>How does Erasmus+ contribute to helping young people going through the "transition" from being adolescent to becoming adult?</i>

Contrasting positions: under-representation young people	
1. <i>"Only 37 Members of European Parliament under the age of 35 is not a problem. Older people can represent young people, as they are more experienced and may be parents."</i>	2. <i>"The number of young people in the European Parliament needs to increase importantly, so as to directly represent young people's interests, to allow them to co-shape their future and that of Europe and represent the European ideal".</i>

Position-taking by participants	
(participants choose one of the two positions above and justify their position; the facilitator can help, also by referring to the questions below)	
<i>Is learning mobility through Erasmus+ a process of preparing young people to become full European citizens or political beings? Is it only after they finish their studies or traineeships that they will be prepared sufficiently?</i> <i>Do older generations "know best" because of more experience?</i>	<i>How does Erasmus+ contribute to preparing young people for engaging in political life, also by standing as a young politician, as well as by engaging in (European) civil society?</i> <i>How can young people be included in all kinds of political and social contexts where decisions are being made? How can Erasmus+ help to guide this process developing a stronger transnational European public sphere?</i>

Young people and voting age

A participant in discussion group mentioned that young people have less people to advocate for them. The pandemic was especially hard on them. To lower the voting age to 16 years would show them that they are taken seriously. It helps them to become aware of politics. Also, at 16 years of age they are already informed, and the age limit of 18 years was made up decades ago. Another group agreed that age is just a number, and it does not necessarily show the maturity for being able to vote ("experience, not the age"). Rather, institutions or schools should spend energy in communicating the importance of voting, the process and mechanisms behind it, the way institutions work, the change people can contribute to, the civic engagement in a word.



The same group put forward that information is the key to raise awareness of the importance of voting. Lots of problems arise because of the lack of information or understanding of how the EU works, the history of voting, what are the results of the voting process, how young people could become a part of the process and the European Parliament (where they are under-represented). It was further argued that often people do not see the result of their participation ("people are involved in discussion, but the result is decided by those in power"). One of the participants presented an example of a woman who is a millionaire and wanted to donate money. Instead of deciding by herself who will benefit from the funding, she gathered an aleatory citizen assembly, which would agree on how to invest that money for the good of the community¹⁵. A similar approach could be implemented in political or societal decision-making.

A third group proposed that young people should be involved in various activities connected with voting since the beginning of their education. They should be aware and confident that their opinion will be crucial and taken into account. If we do not develop the habit of taking part in voting among young people, as adults, they will not be interested in participating in elections/voting.

Young people and underrepresentation

One group argued that young people tend to be more radical in their ideas, while older people are more moderate. In this sense, MEPs should have a family, so that they think of the next generation. It was also argued that old people are wiser and can represent young people, as they have experience which the younger generation is lacking.

¹⁵ See <https://www.dw.com/en/austria-citizens-group-decides-fate-of-heiress-fortune/a-69396454>



Another group thought that underrepresentation is linked to the lack of participation. Hence, to increase participation a more solid representation of young people is needed. In fact, also the first group put forward that a younger voting age and having young representatives influence each other. In addition, young people tend to have different ideas/topics of interest from older generations.

A third group acknowledged the lack of political representation for young people, but also thought that there are other dimensions to be considered, for instance in terms of the underrepresentation of disabled people or the lack of access to politics for migrants. Another participant stated that there is a need for young MEPs. Erasmus+ can help by making young people more active. If one goes to another country, one's outlook is changed.

Theme 2

Group discussions – Youth representation

Some of the key remarks

Voting as such is an issue nowadays, because of the fatigue. Young people are tired of politics, they do not see or understand the results of the process of voting (“only promises, nothing changes”). In the countries that have voting as a mandatory activity for younger people (Belgium for instance introduced it mandatory for the age of 16), lots of protest votes are expected.

This group of young people [[16 years of age] does not have sufficient knowledge concerning the EU, its structures and functioning. The knowledge of this group should be better established. First of all, people who are voting should be convinced for what/for whom they are voting. People under 16 might not have such a conviction.

Voting at the age of 16 age is fine, but a process should be established to get more young people informed and interested in politics – to develop specialized courses.

Florence, 5 August, 2024



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Erasmus+

Arricchisce la vita, apre la mente.



PARTICIPATION ERASMUS ALUMNI
FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

EU Values and European Citizenship Education

Lisbon 30 October – 2 November, 2024

Author

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AGENZIA NAZIONALE

ERASMUS+

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*This report (November 2024) on EU Values and European Citizenship Education was written in the context of the **TCA Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement (PEACE)**, coordinated by INDIRE/Erasmus Agency Italy and the international event 'Exploring networks across sectors and establishing a European community', held in Lisbon, 30 October - 2 November, 2024. The author expresses his gratitude to the organizers of the event.*

Section 1

Introduction

Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement (PEACE) is a Long-Term Action with an original mission: exploring the relation between social and civic engagement, political participation, and European citizenship, on one hand, and the Erasmus+ Programme, on the other. The priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme include the creation of

opportunities for people's participation in democratic life, social and civic engagement through formal or non-formal learning activities. The focus is put on raising awareness of and understanding the European Union context, notably as regards the common EU values, the principles of unity and diversity, as well as their social, cultural and historical heritage (EC 2023: 10).

This report – the fourth one in the PEACE Action – focusses on European values and European citizenship education. The report provides background knowledge to the International seminar of PEACE, 'Exploring networks across sectors and establishing a European community', held in Lisbon, 30 October - 2 November, 2024.

The event provided an occasion for intense reflection on the values of the European Union as stipulated in article 2 of the Treaty on European Union:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

While on the one hand, the EU values provide a clear beacon for European integration and collaboration between European countries, it is on the other hand evident that there are major problems with adherence to these values by specific (political) actors and even Member states, as well as an increase in support amongst European citizens for political forces that are sceptical towards the European values. Major questions discussed in Lisbon were: what do we mean by EU values, where do these values come from, have European values changed over time, what is exactly 'European' about these values, which ones are deemed most important, to what extent do different European societies have different value priorities, and how can Erasmus+ be a main vehicle of promotion and awareness raising, not least among younger generations.

A second major theme, strongly related, was that of European citizenship education, directly relevant for Erasmus+. The PEACE project is strongly dedicated to strengthening European education on EU values and European citizenship in relation to learning mobility. There currently is no coordinated or harmonised citizenship education throughout the European Union, and even less so with regard to the dimension of European citizenship. A core challenge is hence findings ways of raising awareness of European citizenship, and making EU issues a more structural part of the mobility experience, but also stimulating Erasmus+ participants to think about, and discuss together, how European citizenship could be strengthened (for instance in relation to voting rights of mobile people or of migrants). These topics will be further engaged with in the follow-up project PEACE+.

Section 2

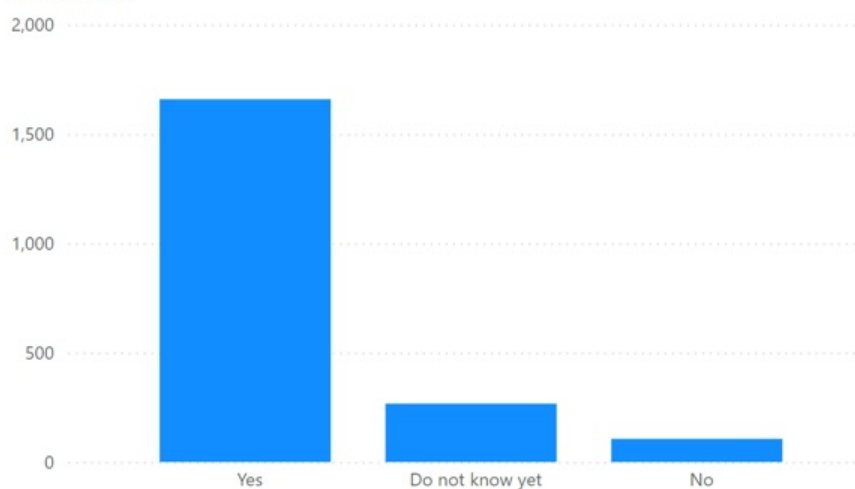
European values and European citizenship education

1. Premise

According to the special Eurobarometer post-electoral survey, published in early October, 2024, in the European elections of June 2024, less young people (between 15 and 24 years of age) voted than in the elections of 2019 (6 % less, from 42 to 36 %), while the age group 24-39 dropped 1% (47 to 46%) (EC 2024). In 2019, in fact, young people were celebrated as having contributed to a “record turnout” and as involving “a surge in participation by young people”. Clearly, in 2024, the picture is different. In general, people above 55 years tend to vote more in the 2024 European elections, an increase of 4 % (from 54 to 58%).¹⁶ In contrast to the main European trend, according to our own survey on “You(-th) and the European 2024 elections”, and in contrast with the main tendency amongst young people, the great majority of the young respondents (circa 2.300) indicated a positive intention to vote:

Table 1. Do you intend to vote in the 2024 European elections?

In June 2024, 720 new members of European Parliament will be elected by citizens of the 27 member states. Do you intend to vote in these European elections ?



Source: PEACE survey on “You(-th) and the European 2024 elections”, June 2024.

As the PEACE survey was predominantly circulated in Erasmus+ contexts (by national agencies in particular), this outcome indicates that there is a significant difference between young people engaging, or interested in, Erasmus+ mobility and the wider youth.

¹⁶ In general, people above 55 years tended to vote more in the 2024 European elections, an increase of 4 % (from 54 to 58%) (EC 2024).

The issue with the European youth is, however, not only a general decrease in engaging in voting by young people. What is in ways more worrisome is that in a number of countries the young people that did vote, voted for radical right-wing and populist parties, in particular in France and Germany. In France, a large part of young people abstained (60 %), while of those that voted between 18-24 years of age, 25 % voted for a right-wing populist party, whereas 30% of people between 25-43 years voted for this party. In Germany, where the voting age had been lowered for the first time to 16, 16% of young people voted for a right-wing populist party.

Both the French and German right-wing populist parties stand for Eurosceptic positions as well as promote the idea of a “Europe of the Nations”, with a strong emphasis on national sovereignty. In many ways, the right-wing, populist discourse may be seen as in strong tension with European values, and there is a concern that conservative, populist and Euro-sceptic views are becoming stronger. The outcome of the elections in November 2024 in the US plays a further role in potentially strengthening Euro-sceptic and populist positions in Europe.

For many, the spread of conservative ideas is particularly surprising amongst younger people. In a research project at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, researchers were surprised to find that younger people, between 16-24 years of age, tend to be less in favour of “progressive values” (which for at least a part overlap with what we understand by European values) in relation to issues such as the right to abortion, the right to euthanasia.¹⁷ This shows a real conundrum also for Erasmus+. While the younger generations are the most well-educated of all times, their values seem more similar to their grandparents than their parents (the baby boomers).

In sum, European values and the idea of further integration of the European Union seem to be under significant stress in current times.

2. What are European values?

But what are the European values that are supposedly underpinning the EU? We tend to take for granted that there are European values, that the meaning of these values is relatively straightforward, that they need to be implemented, and that these values are an intrinsic part of the project of European integration.

We tend to forget however that European values can relate to very different phenomena, founding documents, contexts, and concepts. And we also tend to forget that even in the history of the European Union, values have been related to in different ways over time. One of the reasons there is so much insistence today on defending European values is because we perceive these values - understood as at the core of the European project – to be strongly challenged. Interestingly, both defenders of the European project and various critics of the EU – the Euro-sceptics - invoke European values as their main justification.

It is important to recall, as for instance the historian Wim Weymans reminds us, how the usage, the content, as well as the impact of “European values” has changed over time in the process of European integration (Weymans 2022: 95; Patel 2020). As another historian, Kiran Klaus Patel, argues, ‘stock formulations describing the EU as a “community of values” or “normative power” paper over a long history of conflicts about precisely these values’ (Patel 2020: 147).

In the early days of European integration – in the Coal and Steel Community (1950) and in the Treaty of Rome (1957) – many of the core values were not at all mentioned. One may think

¹⁷ See https://pure.uvt.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/47968750/SOC_Dekker_burgerperspectieven2019_3_Report.pdf.

here of values much cited today, such as “democracy”, “human rights”, or the “rule of law” (Weymans 2022: 98). The core value at the time might have effectively been “peace”. In fact, the Schuman declaration (1950) starts with “World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it”.

Of course, values such as democracy and human rights were much more upfront in another European project, that is, the Council of Europe and its European Convention of Human Rights. It is however important to realize that a significant part of the Council of Europe’s project was to defend Western Europeans against communism, and that a strong inspiration at the time was European values understood in a civilisational sense, largely based on Europe’s Christian heritage and dominated by conservative, Christian positions (Weymans 2022: 99). It is good to remind us of the fact that European politics right after the Second World War was dominated by Christian-Democratic forces. In fact, some scholars argue that the European Convention of Human Rights was strongly influenced by Christian principles (Moyn 2015; Durani 2017) and also that the European integration project could be seen as a Christian Democratic project (Invernizzi Accetti 2019). The approach to human rights at the time stressed in particular values such as liberty and the rule of law, and much less more left-of-centre ideas such as solidarity or equality between men and women (Weymans 2022: 100). Even if in current times the traditional Christian Democratic political forces seem in retreat (Mueller 2014), it is interesting to observe that many political forces invoke the idea of Christian Europe.

Whatever we think of this past of European integration, it should be clear that there are some important tensions there. We tend to think of European values more in a liberal and secular sense, rather than a religious, Christian one, nowadays. So how does our view today then relate to the past? And how should we link today’s European values with the complex legacy and history of Christianity and other religions in the European context? Also, to what extent is religion today in contrast with European values, such as pluralism and tolerance? And how to relate the idea of Christian values (and European civilisation) to the colonial past of the European Union? It is important to recognize that the European integration project developed different relations to European values and European identity over time, moving away from a largely particularist understanding of European values, grounded in conservative, anti-communist, Christian and largely Western European ideas (Weymans 2022: 104). The idea of a more open European identity emerged in particular in the 1970s, with the first enlargements towards not only the UK, but later also former authoritarian countries, such as Greece, Spain, and Portugal. In a way, European values were at least partially understood as the values Member States share and hence what aspiring Member States will need to live up to.

Interestingly, in the 1970s and later with the first European Parliamentary elections, also another, internal rather than external, dimension emerged that made values and identity relevant: the need to legitimate the European project towards the citizens of its Member States (Weymans 2022: 104). For instance, in 1973, the Copenhagen Declaration on European Identity stated:

The Nine wish to ensure that the cherished values of their legal, political, and moral order are respected, and to preserve the rich variety of their national cultures. Sharing as they do the same attitudes to life, based on a determination to build a society which measures up to the needs of the individual, they are determined to defend the principles of representative democracy, of the rule of law, of social justice – which is the

ultimate goal of economic progress – and of respect for human rights. All of these are fundamental elements of the European Identity. The Nine believe that this enterprise corresponds to the deepest aspirations of their peoples who should participate in its realisation, particularly through their elected representatives.

In the 1970s and 80s also the first investigations of citizens' perceptions of Europe and European integration were started with the Eurobarometer survey in 1974 and the developments of the European Values Study in 1981 (Weymans 2022: 104). In the 1980s, with the acceleration of European integration around the Single European Act and the idea of a 'single market', one sees a kind of European nationalism emerging, relating to classical 'national' symbols such as an anthem and a flag. Also, the idea of a 'Social Europe' (in part to compensate for the competitive effects of the Single Market) starts being endorsed. Then, with the new, 'Big Bang enlargement' looming in the 1990s, it became important to identify clearly what the European project is about. In fact, the so-called Copenhagen criteria came to identify what accession countries would need to adhere to if they wanted to become members of the European project. It is particular from the 1990s onwards, that European values – abstracted from religious or other more particularist or substantive origins - become the main focus of legitimization of the European project. They become part of the Treaties, starting with the Maastricht Treaty, and also find reflection in for instance the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Nowadays, the identification of core European values is not merely about showing accession countries what reforms they need to implement so as to be able to join the EU, but increasingly the European values seem also a standard to uphold towards existing members, and this does not only include what for a long time were called the New Member States from Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, the relationship between the European project and the wider public has changed. If until the 1990s, the EU had been largely an elite project with relatively little attention and interaction from the part of European society/-ies, by the late 1990s, and in particular from the global financial crisis onwards, citizens start to become more politically aware of the European project, and various forms of critique and scepticism vis-à-vis the EU have become publicly visible.

In sum, we see changing interpretations of European values in radically changing circumstances over time. We can equally observe significant differences (as briefly discussed below, between countries and between inter alia East-West, North-South), but we may also detect major differences in how European values are understood between different groups in our societies, and even, as mentioned before, intergenerational differences. A further significant, but complicating aspect to consider is that European values can be both inclusive, promoting the rights of minorities and women for instance, but also exclusive (e.g. "European Way of Life"). In fact, some are warning for what they see as forms of exclusivist European nationalism. Kundnani, for instance, understands the idea of a cosmopolitan Europe a myth, and stressed the Euro-nationalist dimensions of the project, not least in relation to its colonial past (Kundnani 2023). Current emphases of the EU on protecting Europe's borders are to be related to such a nationalist approach.

In different ways, the idea of European values appears then as more complex than might be expected. Part of this complex landscape of European values, and of particular relevance for a discussion of civic engagement, are civic and political values, such as specific values relating to democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and non-discrimination. It is these values that are

perhaps the most complex and controversial ones, and that seem increasingly contested and part of conflict in current times. Major contemporary challenges affect core civic and political values:

- An increasing distrust in the institutions of democracy; a lack of satisfaction with democracy
- A (perceived) lack of representation, for instance amongst young people or minorities
- An increase in fake news, misinformation (making forming political opinions increasingly difficult)
- An increased polarisation on specific topics (abortion, euthanasia, surrogate maternity, climate change)

Such challenges are present in different ways in the Member States. For instance, in the Eurobarometer of December 2023, major differences between Member states showed in relation to the question of whether citizens felt 'satisfied' or not with the way democracy works in their country. While in Denmark 5 percent indicated to be unsatisfied, on the other end of the spectrum, 49 percent of citizens in Hungary and 41 in Bulgaria indicated not being satisfied (Eurobarometer Dec. 2023). Equally, the European Values Survey of 2022 indicated major differences in 'dissatisfaction in political systems' between generations (Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, Baby boomers, and the Silent Generation), as well as with regard to the educational background of people. Also, major differences are shown with regard to the propensity of people to engage in political activism, with Iceland, Sweden and France scoring relatively high, and many other European countries much less so (Halman et al. 2022).

One way of addressing the many of the challenges related to above appear to lie in the need for much more public, European, transparent debate, in a shared public sphere, on the values and their meaning for European societies. For this, we need indeed to engage civically and be active European citizens who are willing to discuss complex matters together. In our project, we try to provide a small contribution by debating together about these complexities, not least in the form of deliberative working groups (see below).

3. European citizenship education

Education on European citizenship is not structurally institutionalised in the EU. This is problematic if one considers there is a 'contrast between two observations: the high importance of the EU in public life and the low importance of EU learning in many schools' (Grimonprez 2020: 17). This is even true for the level of higher education, and more specifically relevant for Erasmus+, for students engaging in learning mobility within the EU. Various organisations and institutions are calling for a more robust European citizenship education. For instance, the foundation European Citizens' right, Involvement and Trust (ECIT), argues that '[i]n order to prepare tomorrow's European youth, we must better protect them and provide them with the best possible set of knowledge and values required to fully exercise their EU citizenship' (ECIT n.d. 1). ECIT has developed a draft Statute on European Citizenship and is developing – a currently rewriting a proposal for a European Citizens' Initiative called 'Teach me Europe'. The proposal

*aims for a **Europe of equal opportunity**. In theory, young people have the freedom of Europe, but there is a gap between the fine principles of the law and the barriers to ac-*

*cess. If one-third of EU citizens have the civic education and skills to take advantage of Europe, **the majority miss out**. EU declarations on European citizenship education are a “dead letter”. The citizen-led Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) appealed repeatedly for **education in European values and critical thinking** to meet major challenges: migration, climate change, media literacy and the digital age. The EU ignores this appeal at its peril (emphasis in original).¹⁸*

In fact, as also stressed by ECIT, a democratic citizenship education in direct relation to the EU – understood as providing citizens with the means to civically engage and act ‘in a socially responsible and democratic way’ (EP 2021: 1) - is not least of great significance in contemporary times in which democracy and the rule appear in decline, as various indices (such as the V-Dem index or the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law index) indicate.

Imagining and developing a European citizenship education is however no easy task. This is so not least due to the fact that all three components of the term “European citizenship education” are contested. First, what is “European”, which values and identities are part of it and which are not? Is “European” different from “non-European” and why? Second, what is “citizenship”; who is a citizen and whom is not? Who is a “European citizen” and what does this entail (economic, political, cultural dimensions)? Third, what is “education”, to what extent should it be driven by values and who defines those values? Should to EU be involved defining (national) education?

Education of common or European values involves at least three different levels:

1. The level of knowledge of core dimensions of European citizenship, European institutions, relevant norms and rights as well as instruments;
2. The level of experience and own, individual dispositions and attitudes towards values and rights;
3. The level of practice and engagement, meaning the ability to actually act on values, put values into practice.

As we saw above, European values are not straightforward, and may be seen as a “living instrument”. This means that European citizens’ sensibilities may change over time, and are strongly related to specific contexts. A number of rules of thumb might help us to think more about how to put European citizenship education in practice.

One recurrent problem with European citizenship education is an emphasis on *individual competence*. The predominant idea is that young people – as a kind of civic entrepreneur - need to acquire civic competences such as knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions. But while there is increased emphasis on these competences – a kind of Citizenship education mantra – what is exactly meant by these competences, what they mean in practice, and what major obstacles there are, is little reflected upon (Joris et al. 2021). Also, how contextual differences – in terms of power differentials and inequalities – may impede people from actually participating seems less an object of discussion (Joris et al. 2021: 12).

As the well-known scholar of public education Gert Biesta claims, an important discourse on European citizenship talks about ‘active citizenship’, understanding citizenship as particularly about participation, in civil society, the wider community and in political life, based on mutual

¹⁸ See <https://ecit-foundation.eu/citizenship-education-our-proposal/>

respect and non-violence (Biesta 2009: 148). There are, according to Biesta, however a number of problems with the predominant understanding of EU citizenship as active citizenship.

A first problem is that of functionalism. This means that citizenship is understood as functional to social cohesion and societal stability. This involves less emphasis on the individual, and more on the 'needs' of society. Moreover, it stresses the reproduction of existing societal norms and relationships, while it is less focussing on conflict, forms of exclusion, and lack of implementation of human rights in contemporary society. In other words, an active citizenship that is actively engaging with criticising current societal arrangements (e.g. regarding gender relations or environmental sustainability) and endorsing (radical) change, using for instance forms of civil disobedience, are much less or not at all the focus of the idea of active European citizenship. According to Biesta, the predominant idea of active citizenship emphasises 'duties' and 'resilience', and is 'closely linked to a neo-liberal view of the good society, in which individual action is considered to be the main "solution" for collective problems' (Biesta 2009: 150).

A second, related, problem is that of individualism. Active citizenship emphasises activities of individuals, and less so collective action and collaboration, or responsibilities of the institutions. Active citizenship seems grounded in private motivations, needs, skills and capacities – in a 'consumerist' and self-developing sense (the 'entrepreneur of oneself') – while democratic citizenship would be about the common good, forms of solidarity, and self-limitation. There is also the institutional dimension. That is, is European citizenship largely about the EU institutions communicating to citizens or is it equally about EU institutions providing resources of different kinds for (young) citizens and non-citizens to be able to participate in a meaningful way (one dimension of this is access to learning mobility and the financial means provided to individuals). There is also a depoliticizing dimension here, in that the functionalist and individualist tendencies stress the social ends of citizenship and much less so the political and rights-based dimensions (Biesta 2009: 151).

This brings us to a third, related, problem, that of consensus. Citizenship is understood to be about consensus rather than conflict. In other words, EU citizenship is mostly understood about citizens socialising into EU values and norms. Education of EU citizenship then is largely about transmitting knowledge of values, norms, and institutions. It is much less concerned with stimulating a critical mindset that may lead to a reassessment of dominant values or may invoke existing EU values so as to show that they are not fully implemented in practice. What could be called an 'agonistic' dimension, the active claiming of rights (for instance, for the younger generations or for future generations), is not a core dimension in talking and thinking about European citizenship (Biesta 2009: 152). The latter would include the engagement of (young) EU citizens with imagining a different, more just and democratic European Union.

As Biesta indicates, a different way of conceiving of European active citizenship is complex but also very much needed. This would include an idea of citizenship that is 'concerned about different interpretations and articulations of liberty, equality and democracy' and that is 'more aware of the fact that different interpretations and articulations of the democratic values of liberty and equality point at real alternatives' (Biesta 2009: 152).

A number of suggestions that may help to start thinking about a more politically relevant form of citizenship education are the following:

1. The dimension of *experience and exercising values in practice* is a fundamental part of values;
2. Values always involve forms of *tension, complexity, and contention*; this means that a core capacity regarding values is to be able to be critical, take a distance, reflect, and also, listening;
3. Deliberation about values is in fact necessarily controversial;
4. Citizenship education is not only about acquiring competences but also about collectively discussing, making transparent major impediments to inclusion and participation.

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Section 3

European values and European citizenship education: deliberative group discussions

1. Introduction

The deliberative, group discussions – amongst different people involved in the Erasmus+ programme, such as students, Ambassadors, staff from National Agencies, members of the Erasmus Student Network, teachers and educators) – were focussed on the two main themes:

- *European values;*
- *European citizenship education*

The participants discussed the main thesis, and subsequently the sub questions. A list of action items was provided (see below) that was used by the table facilitator to aid the discussion.

The key objectives of the deliberative working groups were:

- Give people the opportunity to deliberate together and exchange views on European values – in the context of international mobility/Erasmus+ (deliberation).
- Help to raise awareness of the complexities of EU values in relation to the Erasmus+ programme (awareness).
- Help develop a critical-constructive view, where participants (alumni, staff, ambassadors) reflect on how they could (also collectively) contribute to further strengthening the European citizenship education (critical-reflexive mindset).
- Help to think how participation and collaboration are about finding harmony and consensus but equally involve agreeing to disagree and dealing with ambiguity (learning to participate).

2. First theme: European values

European values

European values

- What are – in your view – European values?
 - What are the 3 most important values in your view?
 - In what sense are these values European?
 - What is the basis of European values? Where do they come from?
- How can we have better knowledge of European values?
- Should we avoid a form of “Eurocentrism”, that is, claiming as if European values are only European?
 - What about national values and national identity? How important are these? Are they in conflict with European values?
 - Are values ideological? In other words, are there different interpretations of values that may lead to conflict? (e.g. should all migrants enjoy full human rights or is it possible to distinguish between citizens and non-citizens in terms of values/human rights?)

*Examples of European values:
Respect for human dignity, freedom,
democracy, equality, the rule of law
and respect for human and minority
rights*

*But also (?):
Christianity, right to mobility, right to
life, right to die, etc.*

*See also:
Atlas of European Values*

Values and Erasmus+

- In what (different) ways are European values part of the Erasmus+ programme?
- How are European values promoted in the practice of Erasmus+ activities, actions, or experiences?
- If you need to specify the relevant activities you know of, would you qualify them as:
 - a. about communicating values,
 - b. discussing the substance of values themselves,
 - c. are they about how values are experienced (in everyday life), or
 - d. involving something else?
- Young people seem to be increasingly attracted by populist, conservative and Euro-sceptic ideas. Why do you think young people might be increasingly sceptical of European values? And what can the Erasmus+ programme do to counter this trend?
- What are the tensions, obstacles, and challenges involved in promoting and implementing values? Is it more difficult to talk about values today than it was in the past? Are values somehow political?
- Many values contain complex tensions and may lead to conflict and polarisation (e.g. citizenship rights; the right to life and abortion; the right to life and euthanasia; or surrogate maternity and children's rights). How do the activities you are involved in deal with such complexity?

Disinterest in politics; lack of participation; apathy (value of participation)

From the discussions on EU values in the working groups, it became clear that while the EU values are a great inspiration for Erasmus+, understanding how to put values into practice, and making these values a structural part of European education, is more difficult. As one working group stated, ‘[p]eople take for granted the fact that everybody knows what European values

are and what they mean. The problem is that these values came with time, and it can be difficult to explain how important they are for the different generations, because each generation gives it a different meaning, which can make the process of “fitting in” a foreign European country harder’. Another group argued that ‘[i]t’s difficult to point out [the] most important European values, but the strongest value is democracy that we all share together. Erasmus+ is democratic, inclusive, cultural exchange. Not everyone can do an Erasmus+ because it is just a partial funding. In some countries, grades are a limitation’. And even if we all tend to value EU values highly, there are clear political tendencies that put EU values to the test. As another working group argued, ‘[n]owadays it is cool to be fond of right-wing. Rich and more educated young tend to be more progressive, but there is a huge group of young people that are controversial to progressive. Left-wing parties have somehow forgotten TikTok and other important social media outputs that young people use. They don’t know how to communicate with young people. Politicians with a strong personality and a strong voice who offer simple solutions to very complex problems are winning more and more votes.’ In fact, Erasmus+ may be an important tool to counter political trends that question EU values: ‘Erasmus+ is an answer to help solving issues in EU. It is very important to live and work with people in other countries. Erasmus+ used to be more individual (one teacher writing [an] application and going on a mobility), now it is far [...] better – it involves communication between school, teachers, parents, communities etc’. Another group indicated: ‘The Erasmus program gives the students more contact with European values by showing people what living in another country feels like, even for a short amount of time’.

Another working group discussed the differences in priorities regarding values between Member States. In relation to this, it was argued that the education of teachers with regard to intercultural competences is of great importance, not least to combat disinformation and stereotypical knowledge, but also to deal with people from extra-EU contexts, such as migrants from Ukraine, Russia, or Turkey. By learning about other countries/contexts, one may start understanding the differences, but also discover that basic values are ultimately the same.

A very significant point was raised in this working group, in relation to a discussion on migration. It was said that many European citizens have the wrong information on migrants, being exposed to disinformation and fake news. An important role for the EU would be to provide transparent information on what is happening on the EU’s borders, what are the reasons of migration, and how can the EU deal with migration in a human and democratic way. One of the recommendations of this group was hence: ‘The need for transparency: European citizens need transparency, they have the right to know what’s going on at their borders, the right of Europeans to have information (also in order to help migrants / organise aid, show solidarity).’ In relation, the same group argued that education is also about educating on the basis of empathy. Hence, the ‘importance of listening and to be listened to, e.g. migrants should have the right to tell their stories.’



Working group debating in Lisbon, 1 November, 2024.

3. Second theme: European citizenship education

European citizenship education		
Scenario 1 Knowledge The priority in European citizenship education needs to be: to educate young people and other participants by providing them robust knowledge on EU institutions, EU fundamental rights, EU history and EU policies.	Scenario 2 Critical awareness The priority in European citizenship education needs to be: to make young people and other participants critically aware of the complexities and contradictions in the European integration project, by for instance explicitly discussing the colonial past of European countries, and of the EU itself and by explicitly addressing existing forms of discrimination and the role of EU institutions in this.	Scenario 3 Activist The priority in European citizenship education needs to be: to make young people and other participants aware of their own responsibility in actively engaging with European values and actively promoting non-discrimination, equality and inclusion in real life.

- What should be the priorities in European citizenship education (the three scenarios: 1. Knowledge; 2. Critical awareness; 3. Active engagement)?
- Which of the three scenarios (above) do you like best? And why?
- What is European citizenship in your view? What makes European citizenship unique?
- Is European citizenship education already an important part of Erasmus+ (e.g. in E-Twinning or other activities?) If so, how effective is it?
- Is European citizenship an explicitly addressed part in Erasmus+ exchanges? Are participants, staff, and others involved sufficiently knowledgeable about values, value conflict, and potential tensions?
- To what extent do Erasmus actions allow for participants to provide their own understanding of European citizenship/articulations of values?
- To what extent do Erasmus actions stimulate young people to express their own views on European citizenship and values?
- Are programmes and actions related to European citizenship sufficiently critical?
- What does it mean for education to be “critical”?
- How can the scenarios above best be implemented in specific Erasmus+ actions?
- What are the main challenges to implementing European citizenship education in Erasmus?
- Are there tensions/conflicts/irritations between national and European levels/institutions, or between national institutions and individual/local schools?
- Are there national differences between for instance National Agencies in defining, prioritizing civic issues and citizenship education?
- In what ways are actions and projects evaluated in relation to their contribution to European citizenship education?
- How can polarisation – in terms of strong differences between viewpoints on complex issues – be best dealt with in citizenship education?
- What should PEACE+ (the successor project to the current PEACE project/TCA) do in terms of constructing a more robust European citizenship education programme? What should be strengthened?
- Possible suggestions:
 - A permanent Erasmus network on European citizenship education
 - Training of Erasmus participants to become “ambassadors of civic engagement”
 - Creating civic laboratories as part of Erasmus exchanges where participants learn about and share views on values and citizenship

European citizenship education is in need of strengthening, according to most working groups. One priority indicated by several working groups is a focus on increasing ‘critical awareness’ and more systematic attention to European human rights in education: ‘it is very important to make young people (and other participants) critically aware of the complexities and contradictions in EU. For that we need very precise planning and communication for dissemination and highly qualified professionals. We should let people to find out the answers themselves rather than give answers before them’. According to one group, European citizenship education can also be done in an implicit manner: ‘the best way to learn about Europe and the other countries in Erasmus is by doing various activities on the campus. Formal education doesn’t work, what needs to be applied is non-formal facilitation methods. The trick is in making the students learn without realizing it, for example when we are playing a game about geography, we may not realize but it is a way to learn about it’. This was also indicated by another group: ‘Bildung – a process of development, taking place at the level of the individual. It is very important to experience things. Learning can happen if nobody isn’t teaching. Specific terms and knowledge are also needed, but as next steps on the way of development’. Another group stressed how EU related education is too often a low priority and tends to be dealt with only at the very end of the school year. Also, much of EU-related topics are dealt with in ‘one-off’ projects, and not systematically part of the curriculum. A further suggestion is that EU-related topics should be introduced at earlier, younger age.

Example – Citizenship education on democracy

An inspiring example of European citizenship education, focussing on democratic participation and values, brought by one of the participants in the Lisbon seminar, is The European Heart project. The project focusses on 13–16-year-old students, and follows an ‘emotional-emphatic approach’, based on the psychiatrist William Glasser’s Choice Theory, which argues that human beings pursue a never-ending quest of trying to satisfy five basic needs: to love and to belong, to be powerful, to be free, to have fun, and to survive.

The project follows the insight that democratic and citizenship education is not only about cognitive skills and knowledge, but is equally about emotional understanding, questioning, and interaction. One way of relating to Glasser’s five basic needs is that ultimately all human beings should be able to recognize other people’s needs, hence recognizing they have things in common and build on this. A further inspiration is the idea of nonviolent communication, put forward by the psychologist Marshall Rosenberg.

The European Heart project has developed various educational materials, including a needs and strategies toolkit, short movies on history related to democracy, an Active Citizen Team game, as well as modules for teachers (<https://european-heart.eu/>).

One way in which European citizenship education could be prioritized, according to one group, is by promoting ‘active citizenship knowledge in school curricula for pupils who are about to vote for the first time’. Also, ‘in general (there should be) more importance in curricula or a stronger focus on the EU, more projects and exchange with other schools - plus discussions, e.g. child parliament, interactive projects’. The PEACE+ project could engage in ‘developing materials for teachers for interdisciplinary use’. It could further contribute to ‘European identity

building in schools, e.g. during the Erasmus Days’.

According to one group, the priority should be stimulating participants’ own responsibility in actively engaging with European values. In fact, for this group, ‘the best way to make people (mostly students) be more interested in these kinds of topics (EU related), and be more active, is to do creative tasks and ask questions about the subject, like quizzes and more interactive activities’. One way of helping participants to relate to EU citizenship is by discussing common themes, such as European history: ‘despite the fact that Erasmus students come from different parts of Europe, they can connect in something, for example the European history that can be explained by art. In each country we are nourished with European history, so through art we can connect that history which makes us all European citizens’. Another common European theme is ‘peace’: ‘to be European is to be in peace, which can be strange to say because there’s the war in Ukraine, but the fundamental base of the EU is peace. The world is constantly at war, so it is important to understand how privileged Europeans are for being part of the EU and being a European citizen’.



Working group debating in Lisbon, 1 November, 2024.

A key obstacle remains the limited access to Erasmus+. ‘Erasmus is still not open for everybody, especially in the poor area, people don’t get education about this program. It should be normal to have a year abroad and it isn’t for many people. Most students know there is an Erasmus program, but they don’t have the knowledge of the process, or even the fact that they won’t be alone [when they go] through it’. In the run-up to PEACE+, one group suggested: ‘It is necessary to create situations of exchange, dialogue and promotion of both European values and civic engagement and active participation in the democratic life of one’s own country first and foremost and of Europe to follow’.

Florence/Italy, December 2024



**PARTICIPATION ERASMUS ALUMNI
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Erasmus+
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