THE EU AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES

28 IDEAS FROM THE ERASMUS GENERATION

School of Political Science,
MA in International Relations and European Studies.
University of Florence
3 - 5 May 2017

INVESTING IN AN EUROPEAN IDENTITY ACROSS ALL SOCIAL CLASSES

Position Paper By

Filip Zivkovic & Sarah Spenninck

(University of Leuven)

Filip Zivkovic
filip_zivkovic@hotmail.com
filip.zivkovic@student.kuleuven.be

Sarah Spenninck
sarahspenninck@hotmail.com
sarah.spenninck@student.kuleuven.be

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Introduction: the educational gap of Euroscepticism

Identity and identity crises are well written about. Both psychologists and sociologists are keen to dig deeper into this subject (Woodward, 2002). With the construction of the European Union and the further integration of European countries in one unity, questions about European identity begin to surface in the 1990s. Addressing this research topic is of vital importance for the EU in order for it not to be seen as second order elections, preventing Euroscepticism and not alienating its citizens (Birght, Garzia, Lacy & Trechsel, 2015). This position paper believes that socialization from a young age with the European values can help create supportive citizens. This is where programs like Erasmus+ come in, but the core challenge to this is involving all social classes (Van Mol, 2012).

Situating Europe geographically can be problematic, situating it mentally can be even more. Is the common denominator the Ancient Roman Empire, the realm of Alexander the Great, the Christian countries or the countries unified after the Great War in 1914 ? Drawing the boundaries of Europe is not an easy task, which makes identifying with it even harder (Wodak, 2007). Some research found a positive correlation between economic benefits and European identity (Verhaegen, Hooghe & Quintelier, 2014). Initially, mobility across countries often originated from an economic perspective. That is where student mobility differs, since this is given in by the goals of Erasmus formulated as knowledge acquisition, preparation for the labour market and getting acquit with a new language and culture (EU, 2017; Woordward, 2002). As discussed later on in this paper, these types of mobility affect different social groups.

Those cultures within Europe are different form each other, thus if there is one identity that can be referred to as European, than it consist of a patchwork of nationalities and cultures. Most literature discusses whether nationalism is an obstacle for further European integration, whether own culture and language are slowing a unified Europe down (Anderson, 1991; Cederman, 2001). One group of scholars agrees with this point of view refuting that there is one shared core all Europeans have in common (Vos, 2005; Bevers, 2011). Others prefer to refer to the past, a common European shared history, stating that Europeans are diverse but united. Diverse symbols give expression to this line of thinking (Bruter, 2003). Part of the challenge is that the literature about a common identity of EU citizens quickly silts into a sensitive discussion about more or less sovereignty for Europe or the individual nation states (Waever, 1995).

Involving citizens in Europe better starts at an early age, therefore programs like student mobility are of importance. Nevertheless, there is little scientific research on this

topic. Not only the implementation phase is important, the monitoring can tell even more about the democratic gaps to fill (Van Mol, 2012). Research states that the intra – European mobility among the lowly educated, which usually comes in the form of labour mobility, is rather limited (Jacobs & Maier, 1995). In the early years of the Erasmus programme on the other hand, a young elite came out of it (Musgrove, 1963). It is no wonder they are pro-European, and research states that lowly educated tend to be more Eurosceptic than highly educated. Given young people are future EU- voters and citizens, this position paper wants to address this issue of lowly educated not finding programs that improve their sense of connection to the rest of Europe and find a way out of it.

1. Creating an identity and EU for everyone

'What is Europe to me' would be a valid question to ask some random young people. Kufer (2009) argues that this is only looked at scarcely. If one does not understand what Europe means for an individual then it is difficult to promote it. Furthermore there is the issue that lowly educated are more Eurosceptic and that is seen as problematic. Therefore it becomes important to raise the question: what is Europe doing for those who do not make it to university or college, and is this tangible for these people? And how can this be achieved?

This position paper starts by exploring what a European identity is in the first place, and what the implications are for policy makers. Next we discuss who the current Erasmus+ program is reaching. After establishing the connection between education, social class and Euroscepticism we argue for an expansion of the program. This is then illustrated with possible policy recommendations. The paper ends with a conclusion, summarizing all the paragraphs.

1.1. What is an European identity ?

Jenkins (2008) refers to identity as a never- ending process of identifying oneself. Van Mol (2012) has a similar definition and points out that identity is not a stable aspect of one's life, but constantly changing due to the context or social reality. Woodward (202) distinguishes several aspects that can help identification: gender, race, religion, culture, age, professional stage in life. Those identifications overlap, so one person can identify with multiple identities, often depending on the context (Van Mol, 2012). The danger with studies about European identity in specific is that the view is too narrow, creating a biased view on what European identity is (Favell & Guiraudon, 2009). Also, differences between countries have to be taken into account, citizens from member states that joined from the beginning tend to be more

European –minded than countries that joined later (Van Mol, 2012). Another point of remark is that being multi -lingual does not guarantee identification with European values.

Several disciplines have tried to understand identity and frame it into a specific context. Political science has also identified a European identity as an example of post-modernism, aiming at a new understanding of boundaries (Waever, 1995). Erasmus is in that sense a very useful program to help shape an image on what Europe is. Students who participate in such a program have real-life experience with (fading) boundaries. They value the four freedoms of the EU, especially the one of free movement of people (Van Mol, 2012).

European identity can be seen as 'a summation of identification process with Europe, in a political, cultural and religious context' (Van Mol, 2012, p.210). In addition to this, this position paper agrees with Eder (2009, p.9) that a European identity consist of multiple views on Europe and does not equate with identification with EU –institutions.

1.2 The place of Erasmus + in the formation of European identity

Seen from this literature, it is important to allow a loose identification with the EU, given it is so all-round on multiple aspects in life. The identification process in the EU is threefold: European history and ideology, second: the legal system beginning with the Treaties of Rome that acknowledges the same basic rights and the notion of European citizenship (Jacobs & Maier, 1995, p.14). Erasmus + as the EU's programme to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe addresses that last aspect. The Erasmus babies are probably the most well- known offspring of this program. It is crucial to understand that research shows that a relationship with a person of another EU- country helps to create a more European citizenship feeling, more than participating in an exchange program as such (European Commission (EC), 2015). One cannot force such things to happen of course, but students can be stimulated to participate.

Reality is that the biggest group of participants are students who study at college or university, around two million. Students from whom are taking vocational training are with about 650 000 (EC, 2017). This gap between lowly and highly educated participating is obvious and explainable. As the European Union grew from an economic union towards a political union, alienation among lower educated began. This trend is especially visible after 1992, with the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht. This phenomenon, the change in citizen support for further integration, is referred to as Post- Maastricht Blues (Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007).

2. Creating a European identity among all social classes

Euroscepticism and lowly educated have grown into one single term. This has created only more distance between these citizens and the EU. They are usually being framed as unwilling to participate in a European project, as not aware of all the benefits they receive or refusing to acknowledge them. Harsh, but often the language used in elite debates, debates that decide what should be done about this problem. These discussions are happening without involving the subject of the debate itself: the lowly educated (Bovens & Wille, 2012). Why do they not feel European ? Speaking less languages and fearing the competition of other employees from less affluent member states all play a role (Hooghe & Marks, 2007). Moreover this gap can be detrimental for the EU itself, in times of Brexit and populist gaining votes (Harmsen, 2010).

The example of the Brexit specifically, showcases that there is a gap between those who believe in the European project, and those who don't. In fact, the general surprise the result brought with it proves this gap is larger than previously expected. Furthermore, this cleavage runs between social classes and different levels of education. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Brexit the Legatum Institute and Centre for Social Justice published a report claiming only one social class had a majority of voters voting in favour of the EU. This was the upper and middle class, with a small majority of 57%. All other income groups preferred to leave the European Union. The trend is not unique to the United Kingdom, as discussed in the paragraph below.

This means that for the strength and survival of the EU, a larger part of the population needs to identify with the European project. This will come from reaping benefits from the EU more clearly and by establishing personal contacts across the continent.

2.1. Strengthening Erasmus +

The national educational system plays a huge role in segregation of the social classes. For example, in Belgium, an early tracking of the different groups takes place. Children are put in a certain educational groups, organised hierarchically. More egalitarian systems like in the Scandinavian countries could help aid this mental distinction partly (Van den Broeck, Demanet & Van Houtte, 2015). Generally speaking, the link between level of education and social class is obviously widely accepted. It has also been one of the most consistent findings in the sociology of education that social factors tie into the performance in schools and therefore in the attainment of a certain social class later in life (Van Zanten, 2005).

As mentioned previously, the connection between Euroscepticism and social class holds true throughout the entire EU. It was even proven before the referendum on UK

membership took place, indicating there is a mental gap that prevented most leaders from solving or at least noticing this important issue. The UK-based Institute for Public Policy Research showed that level of education was an even better predictor of Euroscepticism than social class, although the two variables are intimately linked. In addition, the middle class has slowly become increasingly more Eurosceptic, thereby decoupling from higher class attitudes (see figure 1).

Figure 1

Net support for EU membership by educational attainment, 1973–2011
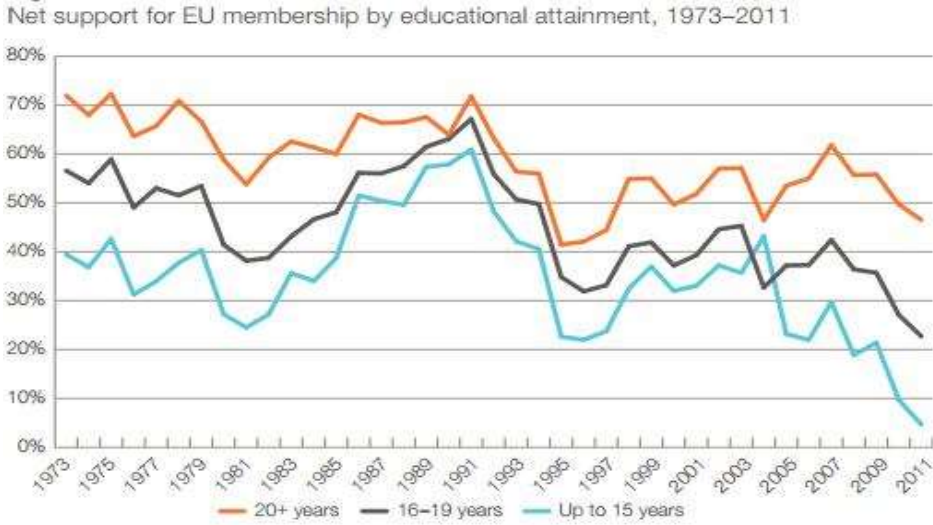
IPPR calculations based on Eurobarometer

Source: Gotfried, 2014.

The report shows a clear difference between those who left school at ages 15, 16 to 19, and above age 20 (Gotfried, 2014). It is therefore important to reach pupils at an earlier age. Socialization with European values at a younger age can help aid alienation from the EU.

This would have several positive consequences. Euroscepticism is negatively correlated to voter turnout for EU elections (Schäfer & Debus, 2015). Addressing this issue would thus lead to more citizen participation, which would go a long way in tackling the perception of the democratic deficit within the EU. It also makes the European Union better equipped against criticism from populist parties. Perhaps most importantly, it would buckle the trend of growing differences between social classes. It is undesirable to evolve towards a situation where it is mostly the elite and the ruling classes that support the European project, in spite of popular opinion among voters.

3. Policy recommendations

Having established the nature of identity, the link with education, and the need and benefits of a more broadly shared European identity, this section will focus on practical policy recommendations.

The goal of these policy tools is twofold. On the one hand, they need to increase exposure to benefits the EU provides before higher education, which is when programmes such as Erasmus+ typically take place. On the other hand, contact across borders and establishing inter-European relations will contribute to creating a European identity. This is why we suggest all measures need to take into account the Intergroup Contact Theory. The basic premise of this theory is that in order to improve relations between groups they need to have a common goal, which they can reach by cooperation and not competition, and which requires personal interaction (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). This approach works best for groups with equal status so to minimise influence of gaps in social prestige. That makes it suited for working with pupils in secondary school, before the age of 15 when differences increase more sharply. A second condition is that both groups support a certain authority that guides them. This role could be for the teachers (Forsyth, 2009).

Although it is not realistic to have vast exchange programs at the level of secondary education, this does not have to be a prerequisite for establishing transnational relations. It is both feasible and cost effective to make good use of digital connectedness.

A good example is the recent initiative of eTwinning, the online learning platform for teachers. It will certainly aid this integration across educational levels and across national borders (European Commission, 2017). However, it would be useful to create a likewise platform for students in secondary school. This could be comparable to a European penpal-system, matching two European students with one another. In the same fashion, projects can be developed between schools that are based on the principles of the Intergroup Contact Theory. Ideally, to support the idea of this paper, one should go and talk to teenagers themselves, inform them about the possibly they have to participate in the European community so there is a better understanding of the thoughts that live among these future Erasmus generations.

4. Conclusion

This position paper starts from the observation there is a gap in sentiment towards the European Union that runs among class lines. By focusing on the role education plays in this, it then develops policy recommendations to tackle this issue.

One important premise here is that Euroscepticism is also linked to European identity, or lack thereof. The question then becomes how this identity can be promoted. As our discussion of the literature shows, identity is a fluid and complex concept that can be multi-layered. The implication of this is that it does not suffice or even help to supress national identity or to simply promote knowledge of the European Union's institutions. The benefits of the European project need to be tangible, and the same goes for a shared sense of solidarity across nations. As it stands, it is mostly the highly educated who are exposed to this. However, those who want to promote a European identity among the social groups that exhibit this trait the least, need to be able to reach them effectively. It is clear that labour mobility in itself does not do enough. This is why the EU must reach out at the level of secondary education, before the social segregation starts.

The goal is to replicate the benefits that come from the Erasmus+ program, which are mostly reserved for college and university students. This does not need to be physical mobility, but participation in (a) an European program that (b) helps establish personal contacts throughout the continent. As shown in this paper, it is having personal ties in other countries that can contribute the most to having a shared identity. This is according to a report by the European Commission itself.

An effective policy tool will take into account the basic elements of Intergroup Contact Theory. These are that two groups that must cooperate to be able to achieve a shared goal in a way that involves personal interaction. In this world of digitalisation, it can be relatively simple to establish programs like this between secondary schools in different countries. One possible way to go is to expand on the initiative of eTwinning.

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