

Erasmus +: Countering populism through education

No. 47 March 2017

By Sarah Gansen

Since its inception in 1987, the Erasmus (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) program has developed into one of the most successful programs of the European Union, gaining in significance and outreach over time. Although only a modest number of 3,244 students took part in the mobility scheme for higher education students in its first year, the current 6-year Erasmus+ program aims with its €14.7 billion budget is to “provide opportunities for over 4 million people to study, train, gain work experience and volunteer abroad”.¹ In doing so, Erasmus plus contributes to the European Commission’s priority of “Jobs, Growth and Investment”. Celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, the European Commission’s efforts to promote the Erasmus program as a “civic experience’ that instils and enhances a European consciousness among its participants”² are now more important than ever. Due to the numerous political and economic crises the EU has faced and the challenges that lay ahead, strengthening “civic resources”³ such as trust and solidarity will be crucial to sustaining EU legitimacy and its future success.

With the UK’s decision to leave the EU, as well as the increasing expression of populist feelings on both sides of the Atlantic,

2016 was a highly turbulent year. With regard to Erasmus, critical voices have already been heard asking what role, if any, Erasmus has to play in this difficult time⁴ and if its resources would not be better invested elsewhere. But the flagship program Erasmus+ might in fact be one of the best tools the EU has to counter nationalism and fight the tendencies that try to undermine its very existence. Erasmus+ provides three very important constituents that are essential to fighting populism and an unhealthy amount of nationalism: it raises levels of education and cultural awareness, it offers opportunities and different perspectives to its participants and, most importantly, it can generate and heighten trust and mutual recognition between individuals from different countries and with different socio-economic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

Academic mobility is multi-faceted and even though Erasmus+ has grown tremendously to also offer an abundance of opportunities in professional training, volunteerism and sport, education and especially higher education remains its centerpiece to this day. Almost 50% out of the 9 million individuals who have participated in the different initiatives and programs to go abroad over the last 30 years, have been higher education students⁵. It is widely acknowledged

that students develop skills for life, including increased cultural understanding, through their participation in the Erasmus program. As a result of being exposed to a different learning environment and living abroad, often for the first time, the students are encouraged to think critically and unconventionally. Their Erasmus experience can ultimately empower the younger generation as well as facilitate their growing into responsible and participating EU citizens as it is often argued that many young people take the EU and the freedoms that come with it for granted.

However, in order for the EU to survive and to flourish, young people need to realize and acknowledge that they have an active role to play in attaining that goal. Studies similar to the one Kristine Mitchell carried out, provide evidence that the Erasmus+ program leads the participants to experience attitudinal changes about Europe in that they are more inclined to identify with the EU and relate to individuals with different backgrounds⁶. By increasing cooperation, collaboration and cultural exchange in education, Erasmus+ offers tremendous benefits not only to its participants with regard to their personal and professional skill set but also to the EU. The initiatives serve as some of the most effective, visible signs of what the EU has to offer to the younger generation. Ultimately, Erasmus+ is thus a useful means to “get in touch” with young people and aid in them becoming more EU-enthusiastic (again).

A study into the impact of Erasmus, which was commissioned by the European Commission in late 2014, also found that young professionals who took part in the Erasmus program and thus have international experience are at an obvious advantage on the job market. Not only are they more likely to find and hold a job after graduation but their

long-term unemployment rate is also only half of that of those who did not go abroad⁷. What is more, the study showed that the Erasmus trainee scheme increases mobility as the participants are more likely to move country after graduation with one in three Erasmus trainees being offered a permanent job by their host company abroad⁸. Especially in a time of persisting high levels of youth unemployment and economic hardship, these findings are significant and underline the fact that Erasmus creates valuable opportunities for its participants. That is why the former European commissioner Androulla Vassiliou urged member states to find “additional funding [...] to meet the financial commitments” of the Erasmus program to ensure that these opportunities for young people are secured and expanded.

In Italy, youth unemployment is at a striking 40%, for example, and combined with the refugee and financial crises, populist rhetoric there and in other EU member countries often falls on fertile ground with young, dissatisfied individuals, who feel like they have no perspective. In a Eurobarometer poll, 57% of young EU citizens admitted that they feel “marginalized and excluded from social and economic life”⁹ in their countries, giving way to resentment and anti-EU sentiments. These figures are alarming. Therefore, the expansion of Erasmus+ and further investment into it is more important than ever. The mobility it allows for and opportunities it creates especially in terms of professional training and vocational education make it possible for participants to develop vital skills.

But most importantly, Erasmus succeeds in giving young professionals “the gift of perspective”. Participant feedback shows that they have come to appreciate their peers’ diversity and are thus better equipped

to work in an increasingly interconnected global market place¹⁰. Also, taking part in the Erasmus program has prepared them “for the realities of emigration and an increasingly competitive job market”¹¹ so that they are less susceptible to xenophobic rhetoric and destructive nationalism put forward by parties in their home country.

This point is linked to the third and final aspect of Erasmus having a positive impact on levels of trust between individuals from different countries. As the first Vice-President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans explained in an interview in December, the concerning trend of spreading nationalism might result in “societies [...] becoming increasingly suspicious of their neighbors and partners”¹². Due to connecting people and favoring mutual recognition and understanding, the Erasmus+ initiatives counteract this trend. Renowned institutions like the British Council and the Goethe-Institute are of the opinion that “building trust is best done by developing people-to-people relationships”¹³. Erasmus+ can be said to generate trust among the participants by allowing them to experience a feeling of solidarity and sense of togetherness based on their personal interaction, shared community and social communication. This is thus beneficial to the individuals but also to the EU as an institution. Trust as a “civic resource” is essential to any political system to function well and operate in the long run. Promoting a sense of Europe through Erasmus can ultimately help the EU to solve its legitimacy problem and overcome recent crises.

Countering the widespread disillusionment with the EU, the further expansion of Erasmus+ gives the vast majority of EU citizens from any professional, social and cultural background the opportunity to participate in one of the programs, broaden their horizons as well as deepen their understanding of other EU countries and cultures. Erasmus+ contributes to erode what the British politician Tim Farron refers to as the “culturally rooted mistrust that sets nation against nation”¹⁴. Consequently, the goal of the current and future strategy should above all be to effectively expand the Erasmus+ initiatives and efficiently deepen cooperation. The focus here should especially be on increasing online visibility and outreach as well as creating more platforms like eTwinning to communicate, collaborate and evoke the feeling of being part of a community, which might ultimately support and strengthen the development of a European identity.

Sarah Gansen, ZEI Fellow “Class of 2014”, is a Graduate Academic Assistant for European and International Networks at the International Office of the University of Bonn.

Bibliography:

1. European Commission: *New figures show record number of participants in Erasmus+ (January 26, 2017)*, retrieved from: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-82_en.htm (accessed February 28, 2017).
2. Mitchell, Kristine, “Student mobility and European Identity: Erasmus Study as a civic experience?”, *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, Volume 8, Issue 4 (2012): 491, retrieved from: <http://users.dickinson.edu/~mitchelk/publications/JCER%20-%20Student%20mobility%20and%20European%20Identity%20-%20Jan13.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2017).
3. Karolewski, Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski and Kaina, Viktoria, *Civic Resources and the Future of the European Union* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 4.

ZEI Insights are part of the Research Project - Governance and Regulation in the EU: [The Future of Europe](#)

ZEI Insights provide commentary and critical analysis on governance and regulation issues related to the future of the European Union. Authors are responsible for their own views.

4. Vaughan, Billy, "Erasmus and The New Europe: Peter Sutherland", *University Observer* (June 14, 2016), retrieved from: <http://www.universityobserver.ie/features/erasmus-and-the-new-europe-peter-sutherland/> (accessed February 28, 2017).
5. Erasmus Student Network: Erasmus+ 30th Anniversary Celebrations Launched in Brussels (January 26, 2017), retrieved from: <https://esn.org/news/erasmus-30th-anniversary-celebrations-launched> (accessed February 28, 2017).
6. Mitchell, Kristine, "Student mobility and European Identity: Erasmus Study as a civic experience?", *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, Volume 8, Issue 4 (2012): 491, retrieved from: <http://users.dickinson.edu/~mitchelk/publications/JCER%20-%20Student%20mobility%20and%20European%20Identity%20-%20Jan13.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2017).
7. Kroet, Cynthia, "Member states should stick to Erasmus commitments, says Commission", *Politico* (September 22, 2014), retrieved from: <http://www.politico.eu/article/member-states-should-stick-to-erasmus-commitments-says-commission/> (accessed February 28, 2017).
8. European Commission: New figures show record number of participants in Erasmus+ (January 26, 2017), retrieved from: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-82_en.htm (accessed February 28, 2017).
9. European Parliament: European youth in 2016 (May 2016), retrieved from: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/atyourservice/en/20160504PVL00110/European-youth-in-2016> (accessed February 28, 2017).
10. Costello, Stephanie, 'The Erasmus Generation' (December 18, 2014), retrieved from: <http://campus.ie/surviving-college/travel/erasmus-generation> (accessed February 28, 2017).
11. *ibid.*
12. Berschens, Ruth and Hoppe, Till, "Commissioner: Don't Take E.U. for Granted", *Handelsblatt*, December 13, 2016, retrieved from: <https://global.handelsblatt.com/politics/commissioner-dont-take-the-e-u-for-granted-660268> (accessed February 28, 2017).
13. Wedel, Judith, *Seeking Genuine Understanding* (May 2016), retrieved from: <https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/ges/eu2/erp/20767537.html> (accessed February 28, 2017).
14. Farron, Tim, "Erasmus is more than a bargaining chip", *Times Higher Education*, August 25, 2016, retrieved from: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/erasmus-is-more-than-a-bargaining-chip> (accessed February 28, 2017).

ZEI Insights are part of the Research Project - Governance and Regulation in the EU: [The Future of Europe](#)

ZEI Insights provide commentary and critical analysis on governance and regulation issues related to the future of the European Union. Authors are responsible for their own views.