

European Civil Action Program: Common experience for a European Republicanism

1. The Issue

A. The problem we lack identification with one another

The European Union has allowed for unique institutional infrastructure and entanglement between its member states which have contributed to the achievement of its most important goals as set in the founding documents of the European Community (Treaty of Rome) and the European Union (Treaty of Maastricht). These goals have been the assurance of peace and generation of economic growth for convergence between the countries. It is undeniable that the EC and the EU have been tremendously successful in achieving these goals.

However, at least as of the creation of the EU, member states wanted to become more: A political and a democratic union. Since then, there has been much criticism focusing on democratic deficits of the Union (cf. Streeck 2017, Habermas 1996, Deutscher Bundestag 2008). It is our strong belief that the Conference for the Future of Europe needs to be the starting point for setting up this political and democratic European Union.

In our opinion, the fundamental problem of a European political union is the lack of a feeling of belonging together, of sharing a common denominator, what one may call a **European Republicanism**, built on common experience or at least the impression of sharing some experiences and institutions, inevitable for a **common demos**. The prerequisite for European Democracy is not a unitarian state nor new overarching institutions but the feeling of belonging together created by the impression that a Danish shares values with a Greek and a French with a Hungarian.

The precondition for this is an opportunity for Europeans, especially young Europeans to come together. According to the European Commission (2004) 40% of Europeans did not want to learn another foreign language. Apart from age, educational attainment played an important role in the readiness to learn a foreign language, being the prerequisite for common experience (65% of those having left school after 15 did not want to learn another language compared to only 23% of those who were educated until 20 and beyond).

Only few citizens have profited from long term experience in another European country. Asked about the EU achievement they benefited the most from, Citizens rank the possibilities of living, working, and studying in another EU country among the lowest (European Commission 2019). Citizens feel that they benefit more from less border controls when travelling, cheaper calls using a mobile phone and improved consumer rights when buying a product from another country in the EU. This is not to say that the latter, more economic benefits, are no important achievement for the EU. They are a good basis for an economic union, but a weak fundament for a European Democracy because they do not allow for long term experience with people from other EU countries. And here again, opportunities to study, live and work in another EU country is

related with income and educational attainment. This partly explains the schism found in EU support, for example in Germany, between the highly educated which are in favour of the European Union, and integration and see how they profited from it, and those with lower educational attainment and middle class who are more critical, more prone to sympathise with populist opinions on the EU and sense that they have profited less from EU integration or even suffered (Albert et al. 2019).

Hence, the issue we are facing is the following: European Policymaking so far has not provided a sufficient fundament for common experience which would lead to an identification with people from other European countries, which is the prerequisite for a European Demos and hence for European Democracy. In addition, there is a **schism in the feeling of belonging together** between a stratum of highly educated and high-income persons and the socially disadvantaged with lower educational attainment and lower income.

In conclusion this means that a scheme needs to be proposed enabling especially young people to come together, learn foreign languages and exchange with other young Europeans to establish common experiences. Given existing schemes such as Erasmus or the European Solidarity Corps and their deficiencies, a new scheme needs to be more comprehensive and more targeted and adapted to the life reality of the socially disadvantaged.

B. European experience: Only for the well-educated?

We identified the problem partly by looking at our own biographies and interaction with other Europeans and by analysing the above cited data.

Looking at our own biographies we recognised that interaction with others from European member states was enabled through education, especially studies in other European countries. This, however, means that students who receive less support and encouragement to study abroad, a problem which is not only related to economic but also cultural capital (for a more detailed explanation see El-Mafalaani 2020) and those who opt for vocational training do not have the chance to get in touch with persons from other European countries.

On the other hand, we got in touch with other Europeans through international conferences on political topics such as the framework in which we also developed this proposal. In our opinion, this may serve as suggestive evidence for those being interested in other topics (such as Sports and Arts) having not the same chances on a European experience. This impression is also shared by politicians at communal level, in discussions we had with members of the municipal councils e.g., in Karlsruhe and Nancy and therefore was a further encouragement for developing a solution to tackle this problem.

However, this evidence is of course only suggestive, which is why a further analysis of quantitative data was necessary the results of which are presented in the first part. That is why the twofold approach of examining our own biographies and municipal experience and combining this with the quantitative survey analysis helped not only to identify the problem but also gave some pointers to the design of a solution.

C. Democracy through a feeling of belonging

The question of why this problem deserves attention was to some extent already answered in the first part. The European Union aims at becoming a political union, and it

understands itself to share important values. The perception of sharing values, however, highly depends on common experiences between the human members of this European Union, for which the EU does not sufficiently provide so far and if at all in a quite unequal way favouring the better of and the highly educated. It is our firm conviction that a European Democracy can only be built upon **the fundament of feeling belonging**, of creating a feeling of togetherness between the European people. If the Conference for the future of Europe therefore wants to be the starting point for the construction of a truly political union, it needs to provide for a European demos. The proposal outlined in the following section may be an important pillar for this construction work.

II. Offering a broad European experience

D. The European Civil Action Programme

To counter this problem, we propose the creation of the European Civil Action Program. Its main task shall be to **organise projects aiming at young people between 15 and 30**. Projects may range from voluntary social work, over environmental tasks and manual labour to programming depending on the interests of those who registered. These main projects shall be accompanied by attractive side events (such as excursions to culturally interesting places etc.) and a language course in the language of the country in which the project happens. Participants can only register for projects which do not take place in their home country to guarantee a European experience for everybody.

Concretely the European Civil Action Program is responsible for the organisation and the publication of the programmes on their website. Instead of going through a registration process, those who are interested can just register for a programme which is the most interesting for them. Costs shall be overtaken by the European Union. Evidently, there need to be concrete age restrictions for specific programs. 15-year-olds will need more guidance than adults, which is why the institution is responsible for the care and support of minors. Hence, although the overall institution aims at reaching young people between 15 and 30, **projects need to be designed for specific age groups** paying attention to respective levels of care and skills.

Depending on the availability and motivation of the participants the projects may last between 2 weeks and 12 months. The 2-week time span may be the most interesting for students, who are time constrained through school holidays, whereas those who just finished school and do not want to start working, vocational training or studying may opt for the one year stay so that the European Civil action Program offers projects for every desire.

Many programs of the European Union for the young lack sufficient visibility, which is why one of the specificities of this proposal is European Civil Action Program shall **get in contact directly with local actors**, who work together with the young people. This may be schools, companies offering vocational training, social workers clubs and universities. This guarantees sufficient visibility of the projects. Specifically, the European Union should designate experts among social workers in many places, who can advise young people on programme choices. By getting in touch with social workers the program is also a chance for the socially disadvantaged to profit from the European Union and make friends all over Europe. As the data we have cited show, so far, the socially disadvantaged report that they have not profited from the European Union and are also

the least likely to feel a sentiment of belonging together. In addition, the German Youth Welfare offices have called for enlarging projects such as the Freiwilliges Soziales Jahre (FSJ) and Freiwilliges Ökologisches Jahr (FÖJ) and target it at young people also from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to open new perspectives especially in the pandemic (Der Spiegel 2021). Hence, the programmes must be explicitly targeted to the socially disadvantaged. This helps to establish a common demos in the European Union but will also have **positive spill-overs for social cohesion in the member states**.

Apart from setting up contacts with local actors, the European Civil Action Program can also rely on an existing infrastructure in some member states and private initiatives. In Germany there is the FSJ and FÖJ, whereas private initiatives such as the Riverdale Foundation are actively looking for support. The institution we plan may use these existing projects, up to now sometimes restricted to nationals, to allow young people from all over the European Union to take part in them. The only criterion would be that our institution can only support stays in another European country than the country of origin to guarantee that everybody can profit from a truly European experience.

In the context of this institution, special attention shall be given to those participating in vocational training. On the one hand, this is because in many, especially Southern European countries where vocational training is less prestigious, participation in the latter is correlated with lower educational attainment. On the other hand, there is to our knowledge no program such as ERASMUS for students at fostering a European network among trainees.

However, such a network has existed in the past. Going back to the Renaissance era it was common that trainees wander around Europe to learn about different approaches from different masters all over Europe. This has several positive effects. Firstly, insights from different masters change perspectives on many problems and may therefore stimulate creativity of trainees especially for manual work, hence also the initial company being responsible for vocational training in the home country would profit from such a programme. Secondly, such as ERASMUS for university students, a European exchange program for trainees enables the **establishment of friendships** and gaining an understanding for different European cultures. Hence, it would perfectly correspond to the goal of fostering a European community as a prerequisite for true European democracy.

Given the differentiated systems of education within the European Union, organising an international exchange seems to be problematic. However, we are convinced that the advantages outweigh the problems. The European Civil Action Program could even lobby for harmonisation of programs for vocational training on a qualitatively high level. As already said before the institution is in contact with companies organising vocational training, which is why they can also collect registrations for exchanges. While firms would pay wages to exchange trainees as they do for normal trainees, financial assistance may not be of primary importance. However, in collaboration with the companies the institution would need to provide advice on the destination country and the company. It may also help to arrange flats for living in the country. To enhance the European experience of the trainees and allow for social contact right from the beginning, The European Civil Action Program is also responsible for organising get-togethers with other exchange trainees in the same city or region.

As suggested by the data presented above language is still a problem but shall not prevent trainees from having their European experience, which is why the European Civil Action Program shall also organise language courses prior to the exchange. Contrary to the main program for young European between 15 and 30, exchange trainees would need to be familiar with the local language right from the start depending on what profession they are preparing for.

After having gained sufficient experience, the European Civil Action Program might then extend its projects also to other beneficiary groups such as the elderly during their pensions or the unemployed. Therefore, the scope of the task of the institution may grow with time. Its core exercise shall be to **bring Europeans together no matter which social characteristics** since without getting together and sharing common experience, the EU can never grow into a truly functioning democracy.

E. Bonding through living

When thinking about the solution to the problem described above, we thought about what holds people together, we thought about why, even though we travelled through many European countries we feel attachment to some places more than to others, why some places feel more as *Heimat* to us than others. We concluded that this was not because one was born at a particular place or because we spoke a specific dialect or language. We sensed that **belonging together means sharing experiences and building friendships**. With this proposal we want to enable young women and men to make European experience spanning a network of friendship to feel that they belong and owe to a diverse and enriching European community.

F. Implementation

The feasibility of the project can be seen by many existing national and private initiatives. The German FSJ has been cited as well as the Riverdale foundation. The United States has made good experience with the Civilian Conservation Corps. However, the implementation of the project crucially relies on the attribution of funds to the concrete projects as well as to social workers which propose fitting projects to the beneficiary public. Money, however, should not prevent the EU from investing in its democratic fundament.

When designing the future of Europe, questions of a stronger integration between European member states must be tackled. If the European member states want to grow together, this will entail the transmission of competencies to the supranational level and requires democratic control. **Democratic control does not only rely on the institutional infrastructure. It relies on the understanding of a population, however diverse, to belong together.** The solution aims at the feeling of belonging together and is the necessary condition for European democracy.

It is undeniable that the present proposal features some similarities with ERASMUS and the European Solidarity Corps being both successful programmes. We want to build on this success but also propose a novel dimension to the quest. First and foremost, ERASMUS and the European Solidarity Corps are not designed to foster Republican values among the European citizens. By construction they can only contribute little to a feeling of togetherness among the European citizens by overcoming national frontiers as well as social class barriers. Profiting from ERASMUS depends on educational attainment, and even if there is monetary support by the European Union,

participation in ERASMUS correlates with high income and high cultural capital. Hence it allows for an exchange between the highly educated, prone to become high income earners within the EU. Our programme on the other hand brings young people (and upon extension people from different age groups) together to construct their Europe. It is primarily not a programme of fostering intercultural education, but a programming bringing together Europeans under a common roof to engage in tasks they consider worthy.

This, one might argue is also the task of the European Solidarity Corps, creating togetherness and a common European feeling already by its focus on solidarity. However, the European Solidarity Corps fails on the scope. It organises programmes up to four months, especially in regions in need for economic support less discovered by young Europeans than commonly known holiday destinations. It is a nice opportunity to spend a summer. The project we offer carries several advantages over the European Solidarity Corps. Firstly, our proposal shall be embedded in the local infrastructure of community and social work in European countries and will therefore be more reactive to the beneficiary's public desires and can thus better motivate young people with all social backgrounds to join the programme. Secondly, it shall not be limited to summer stays. With the programme targeted at vocational training we want to set the fundament for more ambitious projects, bringing together not only young people but also the elderly, unemployed people, manual workers. Because **Democracy is about building a place of coming together** – an agora. Thirdly, by its experience with many projects. The institution will also be able to concentrate knowledge and establish best practices. Launching an institution overseeing many projects and learning from best practices makes for a more successful future than a group of unrelated projects.

Sources

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