

Florent Marciacq* - 20 May 2023

Connecting Europe's Schools and Pupils: A Flagship Initiative for the European Political Community

The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation last year has imposed new geopolitical realities on the European continent. It has shattered illusions that hard security challenges can be offset by soft power and market integration alone, exposed key vulnerabilities in European security, bolstered transatlantic cooperation, hit European economies and reshaped the political geography of EU enlargement. The war has put European nations to a massive test, and it is fair to say that unity has prevailed at the most critical moment. Yet, the war has not extinguished key divergences on strategic issues. These continue to run deep, behind the front of European unity. To make sure that countries in Europe board the same boat in their crossing of geopolitical storms, a European political community (EPC) was established in Prague on 6 October 2022. The 40+ participating states, gathered on this occasion, identified 7 priorities, one of which was... youth cooperation. An ambitious flagship initiative focusing on school connectivity and pupils' mobility would give the EPC substance, identity and the strategic depth required to address the European challenges that are ready to surge under still waters.

Europe's Unity is No Ground for Complacency

The war waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine has unified most European nations in unequivocal support of the latter¹. The EU and its Member States have offered Kyiv over 50 billion euros of humanitarian aid, military equipment, and financial assistance. They have opened their borders to millions of refugees escaping war and have granted Ukraine and Moldova candidate status for EU accession. Moreover, a united front has been erected against Moscow. Perceptions of threat in Europe have notably converged across the continent, economic exchanges with Russia have shrunk, and 10 packages of sanctions have been adopted against Putin's regime. The EU and its partners have closed

ranks and condemned Russia's aggression, with the notable exception of Serbia, and of course Belarus.

Yet, this Schmittean moment of unity is no ground for complacency. Key differences continue to run about the course Europe and the EU should embark on, the polity the EU is striving to build on the continent and the priorities that need to be set. In Southern Europe, migration remains a topic creating tensions; in Western Europe, the green-tech transition remains high on the agenda, and frictions have amplified in the past couple of years even between Paris and Berlin. In Central and Eastern Europe, territorial defence has taken precedence over other priorities. Clearly, national interests have not been dissolved in Europe's display of unity. They remain vibrant.

Russia's aggression has also exacerbated bad feelings in the East, especially against France and Germany, Europe's misguiding "tree of life" (to quote Jacques Delors). In the EU's closest neighbourhood, national perspectives on enlargement continue to dominate the process. Disunity reigns when it comes to reforming an accession process that has been notoriously dysfunctional for the Western Balkans and cannot credibly be extended *en l'état* to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. On the international level, the overhaul of European security architecture, in relation to the United States, NATO and Russia, is already stirring up tensions. The EU is far from having a consolidated stance on issues as strategic as the Global South, the Indo-Pacific, China and strategic supply.

Ambitious ideas such as bolstering European strategic autonomy and European sovereignty are more contested than ever, national populism remains endemic and socio-economic inequalities have reached a new peak. The EU's political deepening, the consolidation, or constitutionalisation of European democracy and further federalisation of the EU's polity constitute major points of contention

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that are bound to resurface. Europe's trajectory, in other words, is anything but set².

The European Political Community as a Policy Innovation Lab

The EPC should be used to addressing these issues and forging European unity on a deeper level than the sheer opposition to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Because it brings together countries in Europe irrespective of their EU membership status, the EPC offers an original platform that does not reproduce and reinforce existing dividing lines (most notably between EU members and non-members, East and West, North and South etc...)³. This inclusiveness, based on an equal footing, creates room for discussing the European project as something other than the EU's sole domain and for advancing cooperation plans accordingly. Moreover, the EPC's intergovernmental nature and light institutional design guarantee a certain flexibility for cooperation to emerge on a mini-lateral level and mature more dynamically. Being a non-specialised format, the EPC, finally, offers a fertile, uncharted ground for exploring avenues of cooperation that might elsewhere be neglected⁴.

These characteristics could allow the EPC to become an interesting policy innovation lab. They create favourable conditions for participating states to join forces in pioneering projects that do not fit the EU's more rigid and technocratic frame; for vanguard groups of countries to emerge within the platform; and for them to bolster European integration, even on the mini-lateral level, and innovate.

Education, Mobility and the Making of Europe's Next Generations of Citizens

The EPC could be used by a small group of policy entrepreneurs (both EU and non-EU members) to address the challenge at hand, unify new generations of Europeans and cement their sense of European belonging. This can only function through education and mobility.

Existing programmes in higher education, like Erasmus+, the CIVICA alliance, campus Europae, UNICA network, European Solidarity Corps and European Universities initiative already make an important contribution: 89% of Erasmus+ beneficiaries feel more aware of European values

after their exchange; 73% are more interested in European affairs, and 33% end up, at some stage of life, with a partner of a different nationality (compared to 13% for students who did not join Erasmus). Mobility under the umbrella of Erasmus+ is a cornerstone of the EU's ambition to become a leading knowledge-based economy; it has been found to enhance employability and career prospects, and for many students, it turns out to be an experience of a lifetime. Since its launch in 1987, the programme has benefited more than 12 million people and in 2021 alone, 250,000 students⁵.

Other initiatives exist, co-funded under the Erasmus+ programme, to intensify cross-national mobility in higher education. The CIVICA alliance, for instance, brings together ten leading universities in Europe. Its ambition is to create a European campus of excellence, with modular courses, joint and flexible curriculum development and a European week for students. The Campus Europae, similarly brings together 30 universities from 20 countries in broader Europe. It encourages students, through mobility and credit recognition, to gain a practical understanding of different European cultures and mindsets. The UNICA network offers a platform of cooperation, on which staff mobility is also promoted (IMOTION). Finally, in 2017 the European Universities Initiative was launched. It aims at establishing some twenty inter-university campuses, or so-called "European Universities" by 2024, thereby facilitating greater mobility. Another point worth mentioning, beyond mobility in higher education is the European Solidarity Corps programme.

These initiatives are a fantastic catalyst for the unification of Europe. But an elitist one. It is estimated that less than 4% of university students in the EU join Erasmus+ mobility activities each year. Access to higher education mobility schemes is limited to students who can afford it and do not depend on part-time job revenues, for instance. It is also reserved, by definition, to students who have enrolled in the higher education system, i.e., statistically, to students with a more comfortable socio-economic background. Current schemes for higher education mobility, moreover, do not promote an even distribution of exchange students. In 2021, half of the students and staff involved in Erasmus+ programmes travelled to one of the following 5 EU countries: Spain (15.3%), Germany (9.3%), France

(9.1%), Italy (9.1%), Portugal (4.9%). In contrast, only 743 or 911 Erasmus+ beneficiaries (out of the 280,400 total number of learners and staff participating in Erasmus+ higher education programmes) chose as a destination a country from the Eastern Partnership or in the Western Balkans, respectively. This gap illustrates well the persistence of dividing lines and the resilience of inequalities in Europe, which the Erasmus+ scheme, despite its political ambition, struggles to overcome.

While higher education mobility schemes provide a valuable opportunity for students to experience Europe as a political space, they can only contribute to a limited extent to the actual education of European citizens. The reason is that identity formation takes place at an earlier age, when a person's personality, values and opinions are still malleable. Exposing youngsters to European mobility at this critical age, for that reason, conveys an untapped potential for anchoring those European values and sense of belonging into the deepest layers of social identity, thereby serving the purpose of bottom-up unification. It also conveys a strong potential for impacting the European spirit of youngsters' families as well. Studies show that personal contacts and experiences are decisive factors in shaping citizens' attitudes towards enlargement⁶.

To rise up to this generational challenge, the focus needs to be shifted from mobility in higher education onto mobility in secondary education. Very little is done under the Erasmus+ programme in this area. In the EU alone, there are 35 million pupils enrolled in secondary education, i.e. twice as many as students in tertiary education. Yet, in 2021, the number of pupils who benefited from the Erasmus+ school mobility programme was just half the number of university-level beneficiaries (around 141,000 vs. 251,000). In the end, these accounted for less than half-a-percent of all pupils enrolled in secondary education. They are, in short, an exception in a general system that does not promote mobility at a younger age. And this exception is not even made available to all Europeans equally, as several countries from the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe are not eligible under the Erasmus+ school programme. Other mobility schemes, such as those coordinated by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, offer interesting venues, but they only have a very limited outreach.

An EPC Flagship Initiative on School Connectivity and Pupils' Mobility

While the expansion of the European University Initiative to all European countries, together with its Erasmus+ funding, can contribute to unifying the continent on a deeper level, an ambitious initiative needs to be launched to promote large-scale mobility in secondary education. Since the EU only has very limited competence in this area, little can be achieved on the Community level. The EPC, by contrast, could be used as a policy innovation lab by a small group of policy entrepreneurs willing to bolster European integration in secondary education.

The European University Initiative offers a good template for the launch of an EPC "European Schools flagship Initiative" (ESfI). The ESfI could be launched by a group of EPC participating states interested in pushing through the project together on a mini-lateral basis. Such a launch, building on differentiated integration, would be reminiscent of the inception of the Erasmus programme in 1987, which started with 11 countries. The goal of the ESfI would be to create bottom-up, long-term, transnational alliances between schools in ESfI participating states; to bolster pupils' mobility and European civic education; to promote European values and identity as vectors of unity; and revolutionising the quality and competitiveness of European secondary education.

To achieve this major step forwards, the ESfI would require all schools in the ESfI participating states to join at least one "European school alliance", each one connecting to another dozen schools across the continent. It is within these European school alliances that pupils' mobility would be encouraged, and cooperation projects developed. The European school alliances would constitute new nodes in the grid of the European Education Area, and they would be key in applying for both Erasmus+ funding and national grants. The work of the European school alliances' network would be supported by an ESfI General Secretariat within in the EPC; a network of ESfI national agencies coordinating the implementation of the programme in participating states; a network of ESfI contact points in every school, responsible for the projects' implementation.

The ESfI mission would start with integrating mobility in secondary education in pupils' regular

curriculum as part of European civic education. This implies efforts at preparing pupils for their exchange through a renewed emphasis on foreign language education and European culture, history and geography. The curriculum of the existing elitist European schools (13 schools in 6 Member States with regular fees amounting to 10 to 15,000€) could be used as a source of inspiration in the adjustments for the implementation of the ESfI, in particular concerning their teaching approach to European history. Synergies could also be built with the Council of Europe's Observatory on History Teaching in Europe.

The ESfI would then need to create objective conditions in schools that allow for yearly, regular exchanges for all to take place. The easiest way would be to establish a "European civic education month" across all participating states, during which mobility projects are implemented simultaneously by European school alliances. Local authorities would necessarily be associated with this initiative

owing to implications, in terms of cultural events, that go beyond the confines of schooling. The length of exchanges would depend on pupils' age from one week (lower secondary) to one month (upper secondary). Pupils' families would be asked, whenever possible, to host and support youngsters during their exchange. During that time, schools would be supported by volunteers enrolled in the European Solidarity Corps. To support schools throughout the year, the ESfI could also propose the creation of an obligatory "European civic education service" which youngsters would have to complete in ESfI participating states' schools, before finishing university.

Such an ambitious flagship initiative pioneering school connectivity and pupils' mobility on the mini- lateral level would give the EPC substance, identity and the strategic depth required to address the generational challenge of politically structuring the continent. It would allow a European sense of unity to take root in children's identity.

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