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The effectiveness of European Union's programmes in building European identity. Case study of the European Solidarity Corps.

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ABSTRACT

The topic of a collective European identity has been of great relevance in the politics of the European Union. Accordingly, the European Union includes in most of its initiatives as one of the objectives building the European identity among the participants. Therefore, this thesis aims at assessing the level of effectiveness of such endeavours through a comparative analysis of two European programmes: the biggest one i.e. Erasmus, and a relatively new one i.e. European Solidarity Corps. Through identification of weak points of Erasmus, the paper confronts how well European Solidarity Corps could be complementary to Erasmus and effectively foster European identity among the European youth. The analysis involves both theoretical and empirical research, based on a questionnaire conducted among European Solidarity Corps participants.

[keywords: European identity, collective identity, European Solidarity Corps, Erasmus, European Union]

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0. Introduction

In Europe, the answer to the question 'What do you identify with?' could vary a lot depending on who you ask. It could be a very local identity, a national identity or even the European identity. The answer could also be all of the above. However, from the historical perspective, it is a new phenomenon that the inhabitants of the old continent identify as being European. Thus, the topic of collective identity has gained relevance in Europe's society. Since the 1950s the process of European integration has had its foundation in the intertwined history of European countries, shared universal values, and collective goals for the future. The same fundamental elements, encompassing the past, present, and future, also serve as the basis for a collective European identity.

The collective identity of Europeans not only exists, but is also being intentionally spread and strengthened by the European Union (EU) as it can serve its interests. Hence, the objective of fostering the shared European identity has materialized over the years through diverse initiatives and programmes undertaken at the European level. Such programmes mostly involve going abroad and interacting with Europeans from different countries. They have become relatively easily obtainable by European citizens, therefore, many young Europeans, unlike in the case of older generations, can declare to have participated in some type of European activity. In fact, I have also had the chance to spend almost two years living abroad in the framework of two different European Union's programmes: Erasmus and European Solidarity Corps (ESC). The difference between these two experiences inspired me to dedicate my thesis to the research topic of the influence of EU's initiatives on the European identity.

During Erasmus, I observed that most of the Europeans I interacted with had a similar mindset. At the same time, I was aware that such projects were meant to contribute to the development of European identity among the participants. That sparked my curiosity to consider whether the European Union's programmes were truly so successful, that everyone I met thought in such a similar way, or simply, they attracted a very specific, homogenous group of people. In fact, for a while, participation in Erasmus distorted my vision of the European Union because it made me live in a bubble of EU enthusiasts. This environment made me underestimate the differences in opinions and perspectives which can be encountered within the Union. It was not until I volunteered with

European Solidarity Corps that I realised that the European Union is so much more than what I had experienced during Erasmus. I had the opportunity to interact with young French students in a rural area who did not see the world the same way as I did. It made me realise that I was taking for granted the level of success of European integration.

Since participation in the European Solidarity Corps has had such a big impact on my perception of Europe, compared to Erasmus, I decided to dedicate my Master's Thesis to this particular topic and evaluate the effectiveness of the European Union in spreading the European identity with particular focus given to European Solidarity Corps. My willingness to explore this topic was even stronger once I realised that there is very little academic research done about European Solidarity Corps. Hence, I aspired to contribute to the growth of the programme that I owe a lot to if it comes to my personal development in my European identity.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter deals with the concept of European identity itself and aims at defining it, basing both on general sociological research and specific papers regarding the particular case of the European identity. Further, it attempts to determine the rationale of the European Union's endeavours to foster a collective identity among its citizens. The first chapter ends with a brief overview of current tendencies in the European society regarding the attitudes towards the European identity.

The second chapter goes on to apply the findings of the first chapter to the European Union's most famous programme Erasmus in order to assess its effectiveness in spreading European identity. This leads to a recognition of certain shortcomings of Erasmus and the identification of the reasons behind them. Finally, these elements serve as a basis for the third chapter which compares the Erasmus programme to the European Solidarity Corps programme with the hypothesis that ESC could address some of the flaws of Erasmus.

Hence the third chapter analyses ESC on theoretical and practical grounds. The practical aspect of the analysis is possible thanks to a survey carried out for the sake of this thesis among ex-participants of ESC who shared their experience and intake on the European identity. This two-level analysis allows to arrive at the conclusion of whether ESC could contribute in a more effective way to the spreading of European identity.

This research topic is relevant not only because of the scientific lacuna about ESC but also because I believe ESC has the potential to contribute significantly to the upbringing of new generations of Europeans with clear shared values and common perspectives for the future. Hence, this thesis will argue that the European Union should devote greater attention to projects like ESC and will propose measures which could be undertaken to improve their effectiveness.

1. European Identity

The following chapter explores the concept of European identity and aims to provide a theoretical framework for this master's thesis. First, it concentrates on theories of identity from the sociological point of view and identifies the relevant elements and features of identity for the scope of analysing European identity. The second point will be an attempt to gain an understanding of the concept of European identity and define it for the sake of further analysis. The final part will examine the reasoning behind the European Union's (EU) attempt to foster the European identity.

1.1. Theories of identity

Before exploring in depth the concept of European identity, it is necessary to briefly consider a broad perspective on the concept of identity itself. Multiple academic disciplines research identity within their frameworks, ranging from philosophy and psychology to anthropology and sociology. Given that this thesis concentrates on the perspective on identity through the lens of a big group in the society that the Europeans constitute, the sociological angle on identity will be most applicable and the analysis will be limited to it.

Identity is a complex phenomenon which can be understood in different manners; therefore, there is no single explanation of what identity truly stands for. As (Buckingham 2008) argues, identity is an ambiguous term and a paradox because

> "On the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time. (...) our identity is something we uniquely possess: it is what distinguishes us from other people. Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind. (...) our identity is partly a matter of what we share with other people. Here, identity is about identification with others whom we assume are similar to us (if not exactly the same), at least in some significant ways."

That is why, it is necessary to make distinctions between different types of identity. The basic distinction, crucial for the topic of this thesis, is a distinction between a personal, a social and a collective identity. These three typologies of identity should not be confused, as they entail not only different structures but also different development

logics. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that the existence of one of them, automatically involves the existence of another one, even if often they overlap (Delanty 2003, Snow 2001).

The concept of a personal identity relates to characteristics and meanings attributed to oneself by an actor, and these are considered individual. Social identity, on the other hand, is an identity, attributed to others to place them in the social space. It is usually based on established social roles, related to family, profession etc. Finally, collective identity designates a set of attributes and experiences, real or imagined, shared by a group of people who have a common sense of 'we' (Buckingham 2008; Snow 2001; Snow, Corrigall-Brown 2015). The collective identity is of interest when talking about the European identity, therefore, this concept will be analysed more in depth in the following paragraphs.

Collective identity in most cases requires a sense of 'collective agency', for instance, actions undertaken together to pursue common interests (Snow, 2001; Snow, Corrigall-Brown 2015). The role of 'collective agency' is crucial for collective identity because the identity emerges only through social action. It is not created instantaneously, but it forms as a process and evolves over time. What is more, it is not an expression of an underlying consciousness. On the contrary, it is an aware concept, self-realised and understood by the social actor. In other words, a person having a certain identity is aware of it (Delanty 2003).

The reason why the person having an identity is conscious of having a common identity is that it emerges as a result of a process of self-identification, i.e. categorizing and classifying oneself with respect to social groups and categories (Stets and Burke 2000). However, the self-identification itself might not be sufficient, as the claims of an individual to belong to a certain group must also be recognised by the group itself (Buckingham 2008). Therefore, collective agency favours an emergence of a common identity, as it stimulates the self-identification of an individual with the other members of the group who partake in the collective action, but also the acceptance of the individual into the group.

Furthermore, a collective identity is usually stimulated by the presence of 'the others', whom the group can distinguish themselves from (Snow, Corrigall-Brown 2015). Through a social comparison process, the individuals with common characteristics are labelled as the in-group, whereas the people with other attributes are categorized as the out-group (Stets and Burke 2000). The division between in-group and out-group brings about other additional phenomena, such as social stereotyping, but also discrimination. Some researchers (Haslam et al. 1996) prove that identification with an in-group amplifies social stereotyping both of in-group and out-group members. Further on, these simplified perceptions of the out-group can lead to their discrimination by the in-group (Buckingham 2008).

However, being part of an in-group does not limit the individual's self-identification to only this one collective identity. In fact, what should be kept in mind is the fact that humans have multiple identities. On top of that, the choice is not restricted to only one personal identity and one collective identity. Each individual identifies as more than one group, it being ethnic, regional, political, national or other (Delanty 2003). Scholars (Delanty, 2003; Snow 2001) point out that with the psycho-sociological evolution of humans and a transition towards a more pluralistic society, the concept of identity becomes more complex. "The cultural logic of modernity has led to a situation in which all identities are forced to define self-understanding in non-essentialistic terms" (Delanty 2003). This tendency is to the benefit of the European identity. First, the evolution of the previous identities accommodates the creation of new ones. Second, the plurality and multidimensional character of identities of humans nowadays allow for the coexistence of the European identity alongside the pre-existing ones. Although historically, such co-existence would be perceived as impossible, because of a stricter perception and secure foundations of other identities, in particular the national ones, today the topic of European identity is discussed and considered by many more scholars, in academic fields, but also people in real life. This arising of debates about European identity calls for a definition of this identity to better understand the essence of the matter.

1.2.   Definition of the European Identity

The issue regarding the core idea that the European identity constitutes is not about any uncertainty about whether such an identity could potentially exist or exists. In fact, there is no doubt that there is Europe with its distinct history, cultures, and traditions. Nor is there uncertainty about the existence of Europeans as a social group with common features and based on similar values. The main issue regarding the European identity is its conceptual definition (Delanty 2003). Accordingly, this section will be dedicated to how European identity can be defined from the notional point of view.

A natural assumption to make about the European identity is that it is a collective identity since it regards a big social group with a collective agency and common interests pursued through the institutions of the European Union. In fact, the term of collective identity is very often encountered in papers about European identity, however, there seems to be a lack of consensus among scholars as to what degree the term can be applied to the European case. Some scholars do perceive the European identity as a collective identity (Mayer et al. 2004, Latcheva et al. 2012, Eder 2009), while others admit that the concept is useful when talking about the European identity, but it should rather be used as an analogy than a direct example (Schneider 1999).

Apart from establishing that the European identity is a collective identity, it is necessary to analyse on what grounds it emerges. The starting point for this can be a typology of collective identity which one can come across in literature on the European identity, i.e. *official* collective identity. This narrowed term designates an identity emerging from a top-down endeavour of elites to ignite a feeling of unity within a newly forming group. Delanty (2003) argues that this particular type of collective identity is inefficient. The collective identity needs to emerge from an explicit self-understanding of a group as such, rather than from institutional or governmental attempts to create an identity. As mentioned in the previous section, identities are created through a process, therefore the European identity has to emerge gradually. Intentional actions to impose European identity can have an opposing effect and dissuade the Europeans from a collective identity. One needs to remember that, although such elements as a European flag and anthem were created with the purpose of working as a magnet for European societies, "magnets work in two ways" and can easily push people away instead of bringing them

closer together (Karlsson 1999). As seen in the first section of this chapter, it is confirmed by the finding of sociological studies that common ground between people is necessary to trigger the recognition of a collective identity. Since it cannot be achieved through a top-down approach, it is essential to analyse potential magnets which could unwittingly and from within, in contrast to unsuccessful intentional attempts, function as a basis of a collective European identity.

Some of the obvious factors and common ground which come to mind when speaking about a common European identity are Europe's culture and history. "The shared historical experience is underpinned by a considerable degree of cultural unity (...)" (Jansen 1999). Another element which historically also played an undeniably important role in the European synthesis is Christianity. These shared elements brought about another crucial component for a common mentality, i.e. similar social developments. It was not until the post-World War II period when Europe experienced such a deep divide on economic, social, and political grounds. The heritage of European countries, coming from prior to that period, remains relatively symmetrical and equally relevant for each country's national identity. This is important because, to some extent, every national identity of each of the European countries contains some elements of the European identity, which exist as an integral part of the national identity (Delanty 2003, Mayer et al. 2004). Therefore, without a doubt, the common cultural and historical background of Europeans as each respective nation could function as a common ground to create a collective identity of Europeans as a group.

Yet, there are some scholars who disagree with the thesis that culture and history could act as a catalyst for European identity. Karlsson (1999) argues that most of the cultural elements typically associated with Europe cannot be truly defined European as such. Neither the Greek nor the Roman civilisation involved all of the European continent or limited only to it, as the influences of these ancient civilisations reached also other continents mainly through the Mediterranean Sea. The same logic can be applied to Christianity, as the religion did not originate in Europe, nor has its impact been in any way limited to Europe, historically and nowadays. What is more, Karlsson (1999) mentions another potential common denominator, i.e. the values, and argues that even though such modern concepts as democracy or human rights have their origins in

European schools of thought, they cannot be restricted to the European continent and cannot function as a sole foundation of the European identity. This argument is explained by the fact that these ideals have become an intrinsic element of other non-European countries in the world (e.g. United States, Canada etc.) and therefore this criterion would be too vague.

Another counterargument against the idea of European culture being the basis for the European identity is the fact that despite some common cultural backgrounds, diversity within the European cultures prevails. This polemic intensified in light of the wave of enlargement in Eastern and Central Europe. The accession of new member states resulted in the incorporation of even more diverse cultures into the EU, and it rendered the path towards a common identity more challenging. Karlsson (1999) was predicting this before the enlargement:

> "It has proved difficult enough to bridge the cultural and linguistic differences between Catholics and Protestants, Latins, Germans, Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians in Europe. The task of integrating the Baltic, Slav and Orthodox Europeans will be infinitely more difficult."

In fact, another scholar (Aleknonis 2022) acknowledges that the debate over the European identity changed after the Eastern Enlargement of 2004. Apart from a growing variety between member states on a cultural basis, the cultural and historical background influenced the perception of the European identity itself. Due to national particularities, the European identity is perceived differently depending on the country. The main distinction can be made between the Western and Eastern countries in Europe. What affects the Eastern countries, is the mark left in the past by the Soviet Union:

> "On the eastern side of the continent, a common European identity faces extra challenges as it can refresh the reminiscences of the Soviet past, when the communists promoted the idea of the new entity, "the Soviet people," which was designed to serve as a substitute for national identification. In many communist-occupied countries, the national identity acted as an inspiration and as a cornerstone of the resistance against brutal regimes" (Aleknonis 2022).

In fact, the process of deepening the European identity was temporarily interrupted by the Eastern enlargement. Aleknonis (2022) identifies additionally the higher economic differences and legal challenges as factors which led to bigger disparities within the Union. Therefore, the Enlargement of 2004 was a temporary setback which slowed down the process of integration.

This argument, however, seems not fully justified in light of the European Union's motto 'unified in diversity'. The European Union is aware of, and glorifies its diversity, therefore it is peculiar that such an intrinsic part of the EU would be portrayed as an obstacle to such a crucial step of further integration that a common identity represents. In fact, many scholars, include the concept of cosmopolitanism into their definition of the European identity (Delanty 2006, Ciaglia et al. 2018). Therefore, what seems more logical is to not perceive culture and history as the sole basis for a collective identity, however, without fully denying its role.

In that case, it evokes again the question this section has been trying to answer, i.e. what could be the main common ground based on which the collective identity would rest on. Since for some scholars culture and history are not sufficient on their own, politics could be of great significance (Delanty 2003, Karlsson 1999, Leigh et al. 2019). Leigh et al. (2019) argue that modern European identity can be seen through the political prism:

> " (...) as a coming together voluntarily of nation states, leading to a shared political system and a common citizenship. A European citizenship therefore has a strong civic component in terms of shared political rights, but lacks a significant ethnic dimension that defines itself against others. Indeed, research indicates that Europeans orientate themselves particularly towards civic aspects of their European identity, associating it with their EU citizenship, their political structures and their rights. Cultural identifiers—peace, harmony, cooperation and the fading of historical divisions—are less significant" (Leigh et al.2019).

The role of political identity is relevant also due to the role it played historically in the creation of national identities. Karlsson (1999) argues that European national identities emerged from a sense of loyalty of citizens to the state which is based on the state's social redistribution of resources, providing education, infrastructure, legal system etc.

Keeping that in mind, gradually a common European identity should emerge through a successful policy of the European Union. Karlsson (1999) mentions examples of what could bring Europeans to feel more European in the long run: facing as a single European market technological challenges of foreign competition or fighting environmental issues. This argument seems plausible as it aligns with the sociological definition of a collective identity which included the necessity of collective agency for a common interest.

Furthermore, to complete the preconditions for the common identity from the political perspective, not only the EU's action on behalf of, and for the citizens is needed, but also active, civic participation. Karlsson (1999) underlines the significance of citizens being informed about, and participating in the decision-making process on the supranational level in order to develop common European political culture and a form of patriotism to the European Union.

All that being said, it would seem that ideally, the European identity would be based on a cultural and historical background, and the common values emerging out of it, and then be truly formed through the political action of the European Union towards the citizens, as well as the civic participation of the citizens in the processes of the European Union. However, although from the European Union's point of view, it would be a full success and completion of all European integration attempts if the European society was composed of active citizens interested in supranational politics and eager to participate consciously in the decision-making process, this is not a realistic perspective. Hence, the continuing attempts of the EU to build a common identity. Therefore, the collective identity cannot be conditioned by the civic and political participation of the citizens.

It needs to be recognised that the concept of identity is complex and cannot be purely pinpointed to specific criteria. As (Eder 2009) notices, "(...) we could talk about a cultural Europe, geographical Europe, a Europe of Human rights, and a political Europe". Not to mention, a potential need to diversify between the concept of European identity understood as related to Europe as a continent, or purely limited to the European Union (Jansen 1999).

Therefore perhaps an exact definition of the European identity in the context of the aim of the EU is not necessary. When looking at the example of the European Union's Eurobarometer questionnaire, in which European citizens are asked to declare whether they identify as being European, one can notice that the concept is not defined or specified. It is more the general existence of such a feeling among the citizens that is of interest to the European Union (Becuwe et al. 2021). The basis of the identity, it being the cultural, historical or political dimension, is not of first importance. It is rather the implications of having this identity which truly matter to the European Union, as it can contribute to further European integration and allow the EU to have Europe's citizens' support to continue its politics and undertakings. This point of view on the European identity by the European Union is realistic since each citizen is entitled to their own understanding of their identity, especially because identity is a highly individual sociological concept. It is also more practical to have a broad definition since it is in the best interest of the European Union to have as many citizens as possible to self-perceive as European, therefore, any restrictions on the definition of the European identity would be counterproductive to the real goals of the European Union, which is spreading and enforcing the European identity.

Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, the European identity will be perceived in a broad understanding, where it can be perceived as simply cultural, historical, values-based but also political; and where it can be based on a single factor as well as any combination of those. A possibility of an existence of a different definition is also not excluded from this paper, since it is based on the assumption that such a definition can emerge from one's own understanding of this identity.

1.3. European Union's goal: Spreading the European Identity

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the reasoning behind the EU's pursuit of a common identity. The motives are numerous and, as one could expect, many of them overlap, due to the multidimensionality of the European Union's undertakings. It is important to identify those reasons, to understand, first of all, why the EU seems to give a lot of relevance to it, and second of all, to further compare if the actions implemented by the EU effectively correspond to the rationale behind them.

1.3.1. Citizens' engagement

The attempt to spread Europeanness among the citizens can be directly linked to the definition itself of a collective identity and in particular its two characteristics.

First of all, an intrinsic element of a collective identity is the collective agency. This means that the shared feeling of a common identity motivates people to act together. It can be triggered by a recognition of a common cause, interest, threat, or fate (Snow, Corrigall-Brown 2015). Therefore, creating a common identity among European citizens is beneficial for the European Union if we perceive the Union as a project. Widespread recognition of a common cause and interest between the citizens would not only favour further European integration, but also facilitate advancement within projects and initiatives, whether they are political, economic, environmental or other. A broader acknowledgement of a common cause behind the European Union's actions could lead to a higher level of support and consequently a lower level of Euroscepticism.

A second point has to do with the understanding of a collective identity as a constant and complex process. Identity evolves with the passing of time, thus it is necessary to continue to engage the European citizens, even if they already have a sense of belonging to the European community to maintain their collective agency.

Therefore, it seems collective agency can have both a cause and result relationship with the collective identity. On one hand, collective agency is more likely if there is a shared identity within a group. On the other hand, the agency is crucial for the creation of a common identity. Hence, it seems beneficial for the European Union to both try to spark a collective identity within Europeans by initiating collective agency, as well as engage European citizens in different initiatives to maintain a sense of belonging.

1.3.2. Paradox of success

This is particularly important within the current situation that the European Union finds itself in, i.e. of diversity within the Union taking its toll. As it was already mentioned in the previous section, diversity is somewhat constituting an obstacle on the path towards having a collective identity which would be recognised by citizens of all member states. However, the problem of diversity does not regard only the theoretical basis of identity.

As the European Union expands and accepts more member states, it becomes also more challenging for the Union to legitimise its governance. This phenomenon is called by Kaina et al. (2013) a paradox of success, because the wider the European integration is, the harder it becomes to deepen or even maintain the same level of integration as in the past. Recognition of similarities between citizens based purely on their national identities has become more challenging and therefore it is putting at risk the idea of collective agency. Hence, the collective identity is seen as a possible solution to solve the paradox of success of the European Union. A collective European identity is portrayed as a condition for any further integration to happen because it could help to get more support for the European Union's politics. "The gradual emergence of a sense of community among European citizens is said to be a means of overcoming centrifugal tendencies due to increased heterogeneity of today's European Union of 27 member states and nearly 500 million people." (ibidem). This regards not only the ideological and values-based functioning of the Union, but also the very basic and practical functioning of all the mechanisms within the European institutions. An example of the struggle and the paradox of success is the decision-making process. The bigger and more diverse the European Union has become, the higher has become the number of decisions taken by a qualified majority, rather than unanimity. Therefore, at the same time, there is a higher chance that a citizen will be unsatisfied and show less support for an EU's decision if their country of origin was outvoted in the decision-making process over a particular matter. However, if the said citizen also had a strong link to the European Union on the supranational level through their European identity, chances are, the decision could nevertheless be recognised by the citizen as taken in their own interest. And since as Kaina et al. (2013) state "to guarantee both the efficiency and effectiveness of EU governance, the use of the majority rule will be demanding more concessions from EU citizens in the future", the need for a collective European identity will only increase. An example of a policy where a feeling of "we" among the citizens of different European countries is necessary for the system to function, is the redistribution policy. This policy area plays an important role because redistribution is crucial to achieve regional cohesion, i.e. render the conditions between the member states more similar. This could contribute to a stronger European identity if the social conditions were relatable in all the countries and did not fuel the feeling of

heterogeneity. However, if the citizens of one country do not perceive themselves as part of the same in-group as the citizens of the other country, it is arduous to justify to them the redistribution of resources. Furthermore, there needs to be trust among the citizens that the favour will be exchanged one day in the future, and that the national interest will be put aside for the common interest. This is why the collective identity is crucial for the future functioning of the European Union since common values can work as the basis for political trust (Follesdal 2014). Therefore, it is understandable why the EU pursues the spreading of the European identity, both for the functioning of the redistribution policy, as well as any other policy field and having mutual trust in the collective actions.

1.3.3. Nationalist and Populist movements

Furthermore, the topic of European identity is relevant in today's times also given the current trends in the European political arena. Strong support from citizens, granted through the collective identity, is crucial in times of crisis and when the European Union has to face many challenges (Kaina et al. 2013). The new political era, driven in a national, rather than international, direction is an example of a challenge that Europe is facing currently (Leigh et al. 2019). Many European countries have experienced in the last years a tendency of raising populism and nationalism, which are challenging the European integration project. This is relevant to the essence of the present thesis, not only because the raising nationalism is an issue for the European Union, but also because the concept of European identity is presented as a direct counter-current to nationalism and therefore, a possible solution to balance out such populist and nationalist movements in the society (Aleknonis 2022). This is, therefore, one of the reasons why spreading European identity is of interest to the European Union.

When talking about populist movements and the European Union, it is impossible to not mention the matter of the populist movement in the United Kingdom, and Brexit as its immediate consequence. Those recent events have triggered a new wave of discussions about the European identity and the need for its stronger pursuit. Nevertheless, the topic itself is not new (Aleknonis 2022).

In fact, a similar reasoning, i.e. balancing out strong nationalist movements, stood behind the initial attempt to create a common identity in the 1950s when the European community was forming. As Marks (1999, 69) states, one of the main reasons to found the European community after the Second World War, was the hope to prevent the nationalist movements in Western European countries from reviving. The history of the Second World War has taught the Europeans about the potential consequences of extreme nationalist movements, and therefore, the process of European integration in the 50s focused on highlighting „similarities and a common destiny among the member states by promoting a sense of mutual understanding" (McGee 2003). Concentrating on common elements between the member states and their citizens was beneficial from the sociological point of view for the creation of a common identity. Having similar, relatable characteristics, and having a common perspective is highly important to develop a sentiment of belonging to a group, since having a particular collective identity is understood as being like others in the group (Stets and Burke 2000). Therefore, at that moment in history, the growth of the European identity served the purpose of integrating the European societies, and as prevention of repeating historical patterns which led to the destruction of Europe.

However, even though more than 75 years have passed since the end of the Second World War, the motivation of the European Union to cultivate a common European identity is partially still based on similar premises. As already mentioned, Europe is again experiencing a wave of nationalist and populist movements which somewhat pose a threat to the European Union. In particular, in light of the recent exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, the EU's reinforced attempts to strengthen the common identity seem justified. It is so, because, as sociologists prove, in-group identification leads also to a greater commitment to the group, and consequently decreases the risk of wanting to leave the group (Ellemers et al. 1997, Stets and Burke 2000).

Keeping that in mind, it does not come as a surprise that in the Eurobarometer survey of 2015, prior to the Brexit referendum, the United Kingdom ranked as the country with the highest number of citizens who declared to not identify as a European at all (Carl et al. 2019). Furthermore, the "Leave" campaign leading up to the referendum which

decided upon Brexit, was partially based on the issue of identity itself. The EU's attempts to deepen the integration and pursue a political union clashed with the strong national identity of the United Kingdom (ibidem). Despite two-thirds of Brits did not recognise themselves as Europeans to begin with, the "Leave" campaign presented the European Union as a threat to the British identity and further deepened the negative sentiments within the society (Harding 2017). One can assume that if the Brits had more of a European identity, Brexit could have been avoided. And since the disintegration of the European Union is not in the European Union's interest, maintaining and encouraging a European identity can help the EU to prevent any further countries from leaving the Union.

1.3.4. Equality

Finally, to consider a different angle on the matter, the spreading of European identity by the European Union can also be perceived through its link to the dimension of values and principles. Notably, this point of view reflects one of the theories of European integration, according to which the integration process is mostly based on values, norms, and identity, i.e. constructivism (Checkel 2004). One of the core values of the European Union, emphasised in the Treaty on European Union (2012), is the equality of the member states and their citizens. Having a common identity with citizens of other member states conduces to perceiving them as equals, as equal members of the European community (Lehning 2001). Therefore, the European identity can be seen both as a result of having these values, and as a means of their implementation. In terms of inducing the collective identity through stressing the equality of citizens, one can consider European citizenship as a concept introduced to directly express equality and incentivise a collective identity. As Lehning (2001) points out these two concepts intertwine. Therefore, this can be linked to an attempt of the European Union to create a parallel dynamic of loyalty towards the European Union, as it is in the case of national identities, and strengthen the European identity.

Therefore, to summarise, the reasoning behind the European Union's attempts can be divided into practical and ideological categories. Nevertheless, they all serve the same goals, i.e. to favour European integration, maintain the ties in between the citizens and

counteract any difficulties that the European Union has to face, resulting both from internal and external developments.

1.4. Current trends in the European Union: Eurobarometer surveys 2003 vs. 2020

Finally, to have an idea of how the current situation in European society stands, and to evaluate the trends based on actual statistics, this section of the chapter will aim at analysing some of the Eurobarometer results. Eurobarometer is a series of public opinion surveys carried out in the European Union since 1973. The surveys regard various topics, however, they have the general purpose of assessing the citizens' attitudes towards the European Union and matters related to it (European Union n.d.). Hence, a part of the surveys is dedicated to the sentiments of the Europeans towards the European Union and their European identity.

To have an overview of the tendencies, the results of two Eurobarometer surveys will be compared: the most recent Eurobarometer on "Values and Identities of EU citizens" from the period of October-November 2020, and the Eurobarometer from March-May 2003. The Eurobarometer from 2003 was chosen as a reference point because it was conducted around the period of the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. Therefore, it includes the statistics regarding the new member states and thus, can provide information on how the self-perception of Europeans has evolved over this time, both if it comes to old member states and new member states. This is crucial because some scholars (Aleknonis 2022, Karlsson 1999) claim that there is a difference in the relationship of respectively Eastern and Western Europeans to their European identity. Therefore, it can provide statistical insight into this matter.

The questions of the Eurobarometer which prove themselves useful to determine the currents trends are: "*In general how much do you identify yourself with being European?*" in the 2020 survey, and "*In the near future, do you see yourself as... (NATIONALITY) only, (NATIONALITY) and European, European and (NATIONALITY), European only?*" in the 2003 survey. In the 2020 survey, the possible answers were: "*strongly identity*", *"tends to identify"* "*neither*", "*does not really identify*" and "*does not identify at all*". For the sake of intelligibility of the analysis both "*Strongly identify*" and "*tends to identify*" will be perceived as one category of having a European identity.

The same goes for the results of the 2003 Eurobarometer. Any answer including the European identity will be counted as having a European identity. The answers "*don't know*" or "*not applicable*" will not be included in the analysis.

The statistics from the surveys are presented in the form of a table. The table includes all current member states, and the United Kingdom, as it was part of the Union in 2003. At the bottom of the table there is also the EU average for each year respectively, as well as specific data for two groups of countries: EU-15, i.e. members that joined before the Eastern Enlargement, and EU-2004, i.e. i.e. members which joined in 2004.

The below-presented data shows that today's average of European Union citizens self-perceiving as Europeans is at the level of 56%. This level is 2 percentage points lower than in the year 2003. By looking at the average of old member states, EU-15, and at the average of new member states, MS-2004, one can see that the drop in the overall EU average is not to be attributed to the Eastern European countries. In fact, in most new member states there has been growth in the percentage of citizens who perceive themselves as European. Only two new member states' percentage has decreased: Cyprus and Estonia. Instead, it is the old member states who have had throughout both surveys a lower level of citizens with a European identity. Already in 2003, the old member states were below the EU average, and this number further declined by 4 percentage points. The number that stands out as particularly low is the percentage of European identity in the United Kingdom in 2003, which in fact, logically corresponds to the following rise of populist parties and the consequential Brexit.

Table 1. Comparison of results of Eurobarometer surveys in 2003 and 2020: European identity

Country	Eurobarometer 2003	Eurobarometer 2020
Austria	45%	63%
Belgium	51%	46%
Bulgaria	51%	54%
Cyprus	73%	67%
Czech Republic	50%	66%
Denmark	62%	53%
Estonia	51%	46%
Finland	43%	49%
France	63%	40%
Germany	63%	58%
Greece	47%	42%
Hungary	59%	76%
Ireland	47%	53%
Italy	72%	64%
Latvia	54%	63%
Lithuania	51%	63%
Luxembourg	75%	55%
Malta	66%	72%
The Netherlands	53%	48%
Portugal	50%	59%
Poland	66%	67%
Romania	58%	66%
Slovakia	67%	75%
Slovenia	64%	65%
Spain	63%	65%
Sweden	44%	42%
United Kingdom	31%	-
EU average	58%	56%

| EU-15 | 56% | 52% |
| MS-2004 | 62% | 66% |

Source: own calculations based on *Eurobarometer EB59 – CC-EB 2003.2* and *Special Eurobarometer 508 – Wave EB94.1*

The data, however, contrast with some of the theoretical parts regarding the European identity, in particular, if it comes to the dichotomy between the East and the West. As seen in chapter 1.2., some scholars (Aleknonis 2022, Karlsson 1999) perceived the Eastern Enlargement as a setback to a common European identity. However, it seems that the negative impact was mostly experienced in the Western countries of the Union, and the Eastern countries, on the contrary, experienced growth in this area. This could be due to many factors. On one hand, it could be explained by Eastern Europe's willingness to leave behind its Soviet past and to catch up with the more developed West also through the identity criterion. On the other hand, it could be a success of one of the theories of European Integration, i.e. Europeanization. This theory assumes that through a top-down approach, the European Union down-loads its formal and informal rules, 'ways of doing things', shared beliefs and norms which are after 'incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures, and public policies' (Radeaelli 2003: 30). Due to inevitable complexity of such phenomena, one can assert that such development is a result of a mix of factors. Regardless of what is the main reason behind this trend, it can be deduced that new member states' citizens are potentially more inclined to develop a higher degree of a European identity. Accordingly, this should be kept in mind when formulating the framework for any European initiatives.

It is worthwhile to also consider some of the conclusions included in the report of the European Commission based on the Eurobarometer from 2020. They are particularly insightful because the analysis took into consideration various socio-demographic parameters about the respondents and had a comparative approach. Some of the relevant findings are the following. There seems to be a slight tendency of younger people to identify with the European Union less than the older generation, in particular people aged 55 and above. Therefore, it could be assumed that there is a bigger need to direct European initiatives at the youth. However, this tendency could be explained not only

by their sentiments towards European Union per se, but a general trend regarding identities as such. In fact, the same Eurobarometer survey included a question about national identity, and a similar percentage drop can be noticed if it comes to the youngest age group. Hence, it can be inferred that there is a generational shift if it comes to the general perception of identity as a concept, and that youth is less inclined to identify themselves with a specific collective identity. This could be explained by globalisation and the cosmopolitan identity that comes with it.

Another relevant finding of the report is that the longer people stay in school the more they identify as European, and simultaneously, the less they have a national identity. Therefore, there is a clear link between identity and education. Other links which have been recognised, are links of the economic situation of the citizens to their European identity, as well as, of their place of residence. It results from the surveys that more well-off people tend to feel more European. The same goes for inhabitants of bigger cities, compared to rural areas. The percentage difference is not of great significance; however, such tendencies can be observed.

Now, after having studied in the previous chapters both the way the European identity is perceived and defined, having identified some of the reasons for the European Union to pursue a collective identity, and finally having analysed the current trends in the European Union, the next chapter will go on to narrow down the field of study and apply a more practical approach. The analysis will concentrate on the European Union's initiatives with the goal of spreading European identity and critically assess whether they achieve this objective, with the starting point of the analysis being the Erasmus+ programme.

2. Erasmus+ programme

One of the flagship programmes of the European Union which has, among other objectives, the goal of spreading the European identity is the Erasmus+ programme. It is a programme related to the education of young people in Europe. Within the programme, European students can spend a part of their studies abroad, at another European university. Depending on the university and the individual learning agreement a student has, this period can range from only a trimester, up to the whole academic year. Since this involves their exposure to the culture of another European country, and interactions with other Europeans, it is assumed that this experience could contribute to raising a new generation of European citizens with a clear European identity. In fact, the European Union openly mentions among the objectives of the programme, the goal of building 'a sense of European belonging' (European Commission 2021). Therefore, Erasmus will serve as a starting point for an analysis of the effectiveness of European initiatives in spreading the European identity. Additionally, Erasmus+ is a significant example because it has been an object of study by numerous scholars, in particular in the context of developing a collective European identity, thus there is available a great number of academic studies about it.

This chapter will first provide a short description of the Erasmus+ programme, its principles, and its characteristics. Next, it will present an overview of existing studies about Erasmus+, with particular attention given to those studies which point out its shortcomings in regard to spreading European identity. This will help in identifying the flaws of the Erasmus+ programme and its areas for potential improvement and then finally, in the next part of this thesis, in analysing another European initiative instead. The focus of the analysis of the other programme, i.e. the European Solidarity Corps, will be on assessing whether it manages to address in a better way these issues and hence could be a better alternative to turn to in attempts to diffuse and enforce a collective identity in the European Union.

2.1. The programme's overview

Erasmus+[1] is the European Union's programme aiming at supporting the education and training of European youth. It is a programme managed, implemented, and monitored mainly by the European Commission. It was established in 1987 and has been functioning ever since. The current version of the programme has been designed for the period between the years 2021-2027, within a budgetary framework of an estimated 26.2 billion euros (European Commission 2021). The programme has grown significantly since its foundation, both budget-, participation- and opportunities-wise. If it comes to the budget, for the programme in years 2014-2020, the European Union allocated an estimated amount of 14.7 billion euros (European Parliament 2013). In the years 2021-2027, the budget amount has almost doubled to the level of 26.2 billion euros. A similar tendency of growth can be noticed as regards the number of participants (Breznik et al. 2020). In 2021 the number of participants in mobility activities significantly surpassed half a million people. This number is impressive compared to the 3200 students who participated in the exchange in the pilot year of the programme. It is estimated that overall more than 9 million students have had the opportunity to study abroad within the Erasmus framework. Finally, the same goes for the number of countries participating in the programme, both as a sending and as a receiving country. The first version of the programme involved 11 European countries (European Commission 2017). Today, students get to choose between 33 countries; 27 member states of the European Union and 6 third countries associated to the programme through Association Agreements (European Commission 2023b).

As the statistics in the previous paragraph show, the programme nowadays has reached big dimensions. Accordingly, one can notice an increasing degree of attention and funds granted to this cause. However, it is relatively a new phenomenon in the history of European integration where such consideration is given to the area of education. Before the 70s, there was no clear interest of the European Community in integration in the

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[1] The name of the programme has changed quite recently. When the programme was established for the first time in 1987 it was called "The Erasmus Programme". In 2014, the name of the programme became Erasmus+, as the programme has been extended and transformed to include also other initiatives in the fields of education, training, youth, and sport (European Commission 2022). Although the programme Erasmus+ refers to various actions within its framework, in this chapter the use of the name "Erasmus programme" will be restricted to student exchanges at higher education institutions. The names Erasmus and Erasmus+ will be used interchangeably, since there will be no distinction made between the influences of the programme prior to the framework change in 2014 and the period after.

education area. Especially because according to the Paris Summit deal of 1961, education was meant to remain an exclusive competence of each country. Only after arrangements between the education ministers in the 70s, there was an attempt towards cooperation and coordination of institutes of higher education in Europe. This created the basis for the Erasmus programme to be invented and established in June 1987 (Corbett 2006). The evolution of the programme accelerated as a spillover thanks to other actions of the European Union. The Bologna Process is an example of such indirect facilitation of the Erasmus exchange. The Bologna Process was a series of actions undertaken by ministers of higher education in European countries in order to consolidate higher education in Europe and create a European High Education Area (Corbett 2006). The main outcomes were equivalent degrees based on the same system composed of two independent cycles: undergraduate and postgraduate. To enable it, European universities unified the system of credits (ECTS), which highly simplified the credits recognition system also for the purposes of the Erasmus exchange. The Bologna Process identified that crucial for Europeanisation and the creation of a common identity is spatial mobility between EU member states. The creation of the European Higher Education Area was a means to facilitate it (Powell et al. 2013).

The same thought process goes for the Erasmus programme since the beginning of its existence. The initial scope of the project concentrated on broader and deeper cooperation between universities, and 'more academic mobility, with the aim of producing greater interaction between citizens' (Corbett 2006). Thus, the idea of using a mobility programme as a means to create interpersonal relations between Europeans, and as it can be inferred, to create a common European identity, has been an integral part of the Erasmus programme from the beginning of its existence.

In fact, still until this day this goal is clearly stated among the goals of the Erasmus+ programme. As it is stated in the official Erasmus+ Programme guide for the year 2023:

> Another 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 (European Commission 2023b).

Apart from developing a collective European identity among students, the programme has also other goals. In essence, such goals are allowing European students to develop new skills and competencies in order to increase their competitiveness in the job market, as well as boost their innovation capacities. The programme aims also at preparing the youth to live in a mobile, intercultural, and digital Europe of the future. Finally, it is meant to introduce more cohesion between different member states and their citizens through converging the levels of knowledge and experiences, and therefore contribute to equality and social inclusion within the European Union (European Commission 2023b).

To achieve a higher degree of social inclusion also within the framework of the programme itself, the Erasmus+ programme offers scholarships to the students, so that the programme is accessible also to less economically well students. Erasmus+ provides also additional inclusion support to participants with fewer opportunities, who might be eligible for extra funding. However, according to the Erasmus+ guide for the year 2023, the responsibility for such additional financial support is placed on local, regional, or national sources. Each higher education institution participating in the Erasmus+ programme must sign and adhere to the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education. By doing so, it commits to providing fair and equal opportunities to all students regardless of their background, therefore it should support less well-off students. The Erasmus Charter for Higher Education establishes also other principles and conditions. These need to be implemented by the institution to be able to send their students on Erasmus exchanges. Such guidelines include for instance rules about a fair process of awarding the grants for the mobility, as well as about preparation for the mobility, for example as far as the linguistic skills are concerned.

Finally, before moving onto the overview of academic literature on Erasmus, it might be worth mentioning, that although Erasmus+ is mostly known as a student-mobility programme, it does not limit purely to students. A part of the programme is also aimed

at administrative staff and teachers at higher education institutions, who can participate in professional development activities abroad, which are, however, shorter than the student exchanges. Both staff and students can apply for a grant to receive financial support for their mobility, nevertheless, such support is not guaranteed. Staff mobility constitutes a relatively small part of the whole scheme of Erasmus, and therefore it will not be analysed in detail in this thesis.

2.2. Academic literature on Erasmus+ programme

As already mentioned in the previous section, Erasmus is one of the most visible and known programmes of the European Union, especially if talking about youth and their education (Wilson 2011). Hence, it is not unexpected that it has been widely studied by scholars in academic fields. Many studies have an evaluative character where the impact of the Erasmus programme on the participating students is analysed. The impact is looked at through different aspects. Some of these include the students' behaviour post mobility regarding their professional lives, in particular if it comes to their migration choices. The influence of Erasmus is also often studied if it comes to its link to the European identity, the level of the students' knowledge of European issues, institutions, and to their level of civic involvement. The dimension of studies of Erasmus and the consideration of its influence on the students have been such, that the term 'Erasmus generation' has entered into a common vocabulary when referring to young Europeans who have participated in the Erasmus exchange. One of the definitions of the 'Erasmus generation' goes as follows:

> "The Erasmus generation, it is suggested, is made up of young people who have enjoyed the practical benefits of European integration, are highly mobile, think of themselves as European citizens, and consequently are a base of support for further European integration." (Wilson 2011)

Thus, it cannot be denied that the Erasmus programme has been of great influence on both European students, as well as the studies of European identity and of society. And since the studies on this matter are quite vast, various points of view can be encountered, in particular differing in regard to the perception of the effectiveness of the programme to induce a European identity.

It seems that in the early 2000s, the studies tended to have a more favourable outlook on the idea that Erasmus contributed in a significant way to the creation of a European identity and that it was a crucial element to the deepening of European integration (King et al. 2003). It "(...) is student mobility which is seen as the prime institutional mechanism to foster a sense of 'European identity' or 'consciousness' ". Additionally, in the early 2000s when a common market was still a fairly new component in the European integration process, international student mobility was seen as a means to facilitate the completion of the internal market by encouraging the free movement of labour. A study period abroad was meant to broaden the professional horizons of students, support the development of their linguistic, and intercultural communication skills and therefore, give them an incentive to consider work opportunities also in other European countries (King et al. 2003). Erasmus was meant to create a new generation of 'mobile skilled labour force'. Hence, the programme, since its establishment, has been directed at higher education students, as this group is most likely to have elevated and unique skills sought also in other countries' job markets.

However, this point, i.e. directing the programme at higher education students, in more modern literature on the Erasmus programme has been the main point of criticism and the basis for a dispute among scholars whether one can speak about the 'Erasmus effect' and whether the participants of such exchanges tend to be more European than their cohort (Kuhn 2012, Mitchell 2015). There are scholars who sustain that international mobility granted by the Erasmus programme has a positive effect on European identity, European knowledge, and civic participation. Based on the analysis of data collected by Mitchell (2015) it seems that there is an increase in the *identification as European* and *identification with Europe*[2] of students who participated in the Erasmus programme. The growth in the percentage is not enormous, since most higher education students have a relatively elevated sense of Europeanness to begin with. Nevertheless, the studies of Mitchell (2015), prove a consistent growth of the European identity in the beneficiaries of the Erasmus programme compared to non-mobile students. What further supports the claim that the mobility period favours the European identity, is the comparison of results of students currently abroad and students who have already

[2] Mitchell (2015) makes a distinction between *identification as European* and *identification with Europe*, as she acknowledges that these two types of identification do not always go hand in hand, and do not always evolve in the same manner.

completed their exchange. Mitchell (2015) does not identify any particular difference between the self-perception as European of these two groups of students. Therefore, it can be inferred that the 'Erasmus effect' is a permanent phenomenon whose influence remains even after the Erasmus experience itself. This argument supports the idea of the effectiveness of Erasmus to spread the European identity, because the programme can be considered truly successful only if its effects on the identity are preserved over time, rather than limited only to the short mobility period.

Other scholars, however, argue that the Erasmus programme fails to truly convey the European identity (Kuhn 2012, Sigalas 2010). These claims are mainly based on empirical studies and surveys carried out among students to assess the difference between the outlooks on Europe of participants and non-participants of the international mobility programmes. It is important to keep in mind that those claims are not based on the complete negation of the overall utility of international mobility programmes and the potential advantages they could grant to their beneficiaries. Some of the scholars who doubt the effectiveness of Erasmus in spreading the European identity still list numerous assets of the programme itself, such as the linguistic benefits, an increased cultural awareness, and the possibility of a cross-European exchange of ideas (Wilson 2011). The criticisms rest instead on the conclusion that the programme fails to induce the European identity because the participants who decide to participate in the Erasmus programme already have a high degree of Europeanness before going abroad during their studies. Therefore, it is not the character of the programme itself that constitutes the problem, but the inadequate target group to be able to benefit from it, in terms of spreading a European identity.

There are studies which explain this phenomenon in different ways. Wilson (2011) makes a distinction between mobile and non-mobile students and explains that those students at higher education institutes who choose to spend a part of their studies abroad originally have a higher level of European identity than those students who do not take such a decision. Kuhn (2012), on the other hand, argues that all higher education students already have a European identity, as in her view higher education is the most substantial factor for it. It is so because highly educated people are more likely to benefit from European integration, through access to the European job market, therefore their identity is partially interest motivated. What is more, generally education is

considered to 'promote cosmopolitan orientations', as many academic curricula 'aim at promoting cosmopolitan and pro-European ideals' (idem).

Sigalas (2010) goes even one step further and advocates that in some cases, the European identity can even deteriorate over the period of mobility. He explains this phenomenon by too high of a level of European identity prior to the mobility which leaves the participant with no potential for the identity to grow over the sojourn abroad, and therefore, it can even lead to some degree of decline. Sigalas (2010) makes also other points to how the Erasmus programme's conditions are not favourable towards a full development of a European identity. Such elements include a low level of contact with students from the country in which they are studying abroad, as Erasmus students tend to interact mainly in their own environment, restricted for the most part to other international students. Second, is the fact that students declare in surveys that most of the high-quality communication they engage in happens with students of the same nationality.

The conclusions that the above-mentioned scholars make are the following. Kuhl (2012) clearly states that the programme targets the wrong group as it "preaches to the converted". Hence, she advocates that mobility programmes should be aimed at low-educated people. Her conclusions are consistent with the results of the report of the Special Eurobarometer 508 analysed in chapter 1.4., where a correlational relationship was recognised between a longer education period and a higher level of European identity. Thus, it is reasonable to infer that Erasmus could have a bigger impact if it was available and directed at lower-educated citizens of the European Union.

Wilson (2011) suggests instead that the European Union should either devote their attention to other initiatives to achieve these goals, or within Erasmus concentrate on those objectives that the programme is most efficient at accomplishing. Sigalas (2010) does not discard the possibility of Erasmus being successful at fostering European identity, however, he argues more attention needs to be given to what conditions need to be met for mobility to bring the expected results. One of the conclusions from his studies is that the programme proves to be more effective on younger students, therefore, for instance, the age parameter could be given more consideration when designing the programme's conditions of participation.

Interestingly, even some of the scholars who do perceive Erasmus as effective in positively impacting the European identity of the students, have similar conclusions and recommendations as those listed above. Öz and Van Praag (2022) recognize that Erasmus is effective, especially if it comes to elevating the level of already pre-existing European identity, and still acknowledge the need to broaden the target group of Erasmus for it to have an even bigger impact. The study carried out by Öz and Van Praag (2022) sheds light on many details, as their surveys took into consideration many socio-demographic factors when comparing the replies of students. Öz and Van Praag (2022) distinguished between higher university students who participated in the exchange, and students who did not participate in the exchange, but also included as a third category such students who only considered participating in one. Based on that data it shows that the Erasmus experience was not a condition to have pro-European attitudes, since these students who only considered taking part in the mobility period had European identity at a similar level as those students who actually participated in it. Another important distinction that was made is between the students from new member states, i.e. from member states which joined the European Union after the year 2003, and the students from old member states. This showed that the trend is slightly different for these two groups and that indeed mobility contributes in a more significant way to the pro-European mindset of the students from those countries which became members in the 21st century. This finding further confirms the trends which were highlighted in chapter 1.4. about the current trends in the European Union, and that there is a tendency for Eastern European citizens to reach a higher level of European identity in comparison to the students from old member states.

What is more, Öz and Van Praag (2022) included another parameter in the analysis, i.e. the size of the place of residence of the students. It showed that citizens from bigger cities have a more positive outlook on the European Union. This is crucial as it can be related to the argument made by Kuhn (2012). As Kuhn (2012) stated higher education is already a stimulus to be more pro-European, but those living in rural areas have a lower access to higher education institutes than those living in big cities. Furthermore, taking up higher education studies in such a case, entails additional costs, since it requires moving to a bigger city where higher education institutes are available. And without getting to at least a second, or in most cases, the third year of higher education

studies, Erasmus exchange is not available. Therefore, this combination of different factors contributes to the fact that the youth living in rural areas tends to have a less European identity.

With that in mind, and the other points made by scholars cited above, it can be concluded that the main problem of Erasmus is not the formula of international mobility itself, but the general issue of inaccessibility. Should such programmes be available to a wider group of society, they could possibly bring more results in spreading European identity among the members of European society. The next section will aim at further identifying what renders Erasmus not accessible enough.

2.3. Inaccessibility of Erasmus

As it has been explored in the previous section, one of the main issues of inaccessibility of Erasmus, which has been raised by scholars, regards the restriction of the target group to higher education students. In light of this criticism, it is salient to mention that there seems to have been a reaction from the European Commission's part to this evaluation. Since 2021 three new elements have been added to the programme's framework in order to expand the reach of Erasmus. The newest version of the Erasmus+ framework includes now also the possibility of mobility projects in school education period, as well as grants access to such initiatives to adult learners. It is a positive sign that the European Union is expanding the reach of the Erasmus+ programme to different age groups and it shows that the European Commission is aware of the limitations of the mobility programmes they propose. This development is coherent with the finding of scholars that mobility needs to be targeted not only at higher education students (Kuhn 2012), as well as, that the programme proves to be most effective with the youngest participants (Sigalas 2010). Nevertheless, the scale at which these additional initiatives have been developed so far within the Erasmus+ framework remains relatively insignificant and inaccessible compared to the size of the student mobility.

What is more, the target group does not constitute the only barrier to participation in international mobility. Even though there is a regular increase in the number of students who go abroad, mobility remains a phenomenon accessible only to a minority of young people, even within the group of higher education students (Powell et al. 2013, Souto-

Otero et al. 2013). This phenomenon can be attributed to various factors. Powell et al. (2013) direct attention to the issue of social selectivity of the participation, as there is a tendency for Erasmus participants to have a similar social profile. They argue that unless more social diversity is achieved, the real objectives of international spatial mobility will not be reached.

Higher education institutes and mobility programmes tend to recruit students from more privileged parts of society – students who can afford mobility, and who express the willingness to participate in one (Powell et al. 2013). This brings forward the second, and perhaps one of the most elementary barriers to mobility, which is the financial inaccessibility of the Erasmus exchange. As Gjergji et al. (2022) showcase in their analysis, the main obstacle to higher education students is the cost which must be borne by them to go abroad. A big part of the students who are included in the target group of Erasmus, still cannot participate in it due to the economic reasons. It can be surprising at first since a majority of students who go on an exchange receive a grant to cover the additional costs of mobility (Souto-Otero et al. 2013). These grants are offered by the European Union to the students partaking in the exchange. However, the level of the grant is not the same for every student. The value of the Erasmus+ grant depends on the destination country, as well as the country of origin of the student. All countries included in the Erasmus+ programme are divided into 3 groups (table 2.). The level of the grant is a consequence of a combination of two factors: the destination country of the mobility and the origin country. Therefore, a student from a country with a higher living cost going on an exchange to a country with a lower living cost is eligible for a lower scholarship than a student from a country with a lower cost of living studying in a country with a higher cost of living. This is an attempt to achieve social cohesion and provide similar conditions to all beneficiaries of the programme. Nevertheless, this system itself does not truly address the divergence of the wealthiness of students within each country, which can still vary a lot.

Table 2. Division of countries in the context of the Erasmus individual support grant according to the level of the living cost

Group 1 Countries with higher living cost	Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden. Partner Countries from Region 14.[3]
Group 2 Countries with medium living cost	Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain. Partner Countries from Region 5[4].
Group 3 Countries with lower living cost	Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, North Macedonia, Turkey.

Source: European Commission Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2023

Hence, the student's individual background may be taken into consideration, if it is disadvantageous in comparison to other participants. As already mentioned in the description of the programme in the chapter 2.1. extra funding might be granted to students with fewer opportunities, as a form of inclusion support. Nevertheless, despite the existence of grants to support financially disadvantaged students, the programme remains influenced by economic inequalities. In fact, what is more, not all participants of the Erasmus exchange are granted a scholarship. Such students are referred to as zero-grant mobile participants. They benefit from all benefits of being Erasmus+ students (such as the exemption from paying studying fees at the hosting university, allocation of credits etc.), but they must either obtain external funding (national, regional, non-Erasmus+ EU funding etc.), or self-fund the mobility (European Commission 2023b). It is so because, as the European Commission (2018) states in an evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme, 'the demand for the Erasmus+ funding largely exceeds the funding available'. The recognition of this issue by the European Union can

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[3] Faroe Islands, Switzerland, United Kingdom
[4] Andorra, Monaco, San Marino, Vatican City State

be seen in the growing programme budget from each budget period to another (14.7 billion euros in 2014-2020, compared to 26.2 billion euros in the years 2021-2027). The budget growth on the one hand allows more students to be eligible for the scholarship, and on the other hand, includes a slight raise in the amount of money available to each student within the scholarship (European Parliament 2021).

However, even if the students are granted a scholarship, the size of the grant itself constitutes an obstacle for many reasons (Gjergji et al. 2022). First, the individual economic situation of each student and their family is one, important factor. Despite the financial help, a semester abroad entails additional expenses which not everyone is capable of bearing. Second, the grant does not truly cover the deeply varying living standards between countries, or even cities within the same country. As seen above, the Erasmus+ grant is divided size-wise into three categories, according to the cost of living, however, it does not represent the real gaps between the costs. Therefore, the same amount of a scholarship can be sufficient in one city, however, be far from enough in another city, even if they are in the same country, or if they are in two countries from the same group. The third issue regards the timing of the obtainment of the grant, which generally does not occur before the beginning of the learning activities at the hosting institution. A departure for a mobility entails various expenses before the grant is given to the participant (such as flight tickets, accommodation booking etc.). Therefore, even such timing issue can impede a student's participation in a mobility programme if they do not have the means to advance various payments. The data provided in the research conducted by Allinson et al. (2021) shows that 82% of the participants of the survey recognise[5] that the necessity to advance initial costs is a practical barrier to participation in mobility.

Furthermore, a survey conducted among non-mobile respondents enlists 'insufficient funding to support the period abroad' as the most frequently indicated barrier to mobility (72% of respondents strongly agree or agree with this issue). In contrast, 85% of non-mobile respondents either disagree or strongly disagree that the lack of interest in going abroad constituted a barrier. These statistics prove the argued correlation, that

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[5] [5] The available answers in the questionnaire were: 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neutral', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. 36% of interviewed students declared 'strongly agree' and 46% of students chose the option 'agree'.

the Erasmus+ programme is more available to better-off students, and it is the economic conditions rather than the lack of general desire to participate in an exchange, that prevents it from happening.

Gjergji et al. (2022) identify perceptions as the final barrier to participation in Erasmus, since a period abroad is still perceived by many as a luxury; an expensive experience which is unattainable for students with a worse financial situation. Therefore, they do not even seek the opportunity. The European Union is aware of those barriers. In the annual report of the Erasmus programme prepared by the European Commission (2022), there are enlisted some of the factors which pose an obstacle to the participation of students, and the economic barriers are mentioned as one of them. Apart from that, the report also mentions disabilities, health problems, cultural, social, geographical barriers and barriers related to education. These obstacles can occur individually, or as a combination of multiple of them. Thus, the Commission has set up various mechanism in the attempts to address these issues of inclusion, however, there is still a considerable amount of progress that needs to be accomplished to be able to say that the social inclusion goal has been thoroughly fulfilled.

Lastly, another point which can be encountered when talking about barriers to international mobility is the issue of insufficient communication and lack of awareness about the functioning of the system, which deters the students from participating in the exchange (Souto-Otero et al. 2013). This point might come across as a surprise at first because with Erasmus' popularity and with millions of students participating in it, it might seem that the programme does not need any more promotion than it already has had. Yet, there are still areas where education and promotion are needed. The first point regards a general perception that the wide public might have about Erasmus, as by a significant part of the public opinion Erasmus is not perceived anymore through the lens of education. This point of view is well portrayed by the title of the article published on the website of 'EUobserver', i.e. "Erasmus – little more than an EU-subsidised party?" (Gronne et al. 2014). This goes hand in hand with one of the findings of the survey carried out by Souto-Otero et al. (2013) and the recommendation that has been made based on the results. The survey found that a significant number of non-participants of Erasmus self-identified as a barrier "uncertainty about education system abroad", "lack of information about the programme" and "uncertainty about the quality of education

abroad". This second point shows that, despite the negative stereotypes about Erasmus, students do care about the educational benefits, and the misconceptions of Erasmus might be contributing to a lower number of students deciding to participate. Therefore, as the conclusion from Souto-Otero et al. (2013) say: "(...) the emphasis of the marketing and communication of the programme should change to put greater emphasis on opportunities for personal growth".

To conclude, the inaccessibility of Erasmus can be divided into three main categories: the issue of the target group, the financial barrier and insufficient communication and marketing. The target group excludes the youth not studying at higher education institutions; the financial barriers consist of the overall availability of the scholarship, the level of the scholarship, and the timing of the payment of the scholarship. Finally, the communication strategies do not concentrate enough on spreading substantial knowledge about the functioning of the programme, rather than just the promotion of the programme per se.

Having analysed the weak point of Erasmus and identified specific elements of criticism towards it, the next chapter will go on to analyse an alternative programme which could serve the purpose of spreading the European identity. The programme which will be studied is the European Solidarity Corps. The goal is to compare the Erasmus+ programme to the European Solidarity Corps and understand if the ESC could fill in the gaps of Erasmus and contribute to an increase of Europeanness among European citizens.

3. European Solidarity Corps as an alternative

Although Erasmus has been the most famous European Union's programme directed at European youth, this paper argues that it might be beneficial to consider alternative programmes which could result in being more effective at spreading the European identity. The programme which will be analysed as a potential alternative is the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). The hypothesis that ESC might be more efficient at spreading the collective European identity is based on the differences between ESC and Erasmus. Since ESC in many aspects differs from Erasmus, it could address some of its flaws which have been brought to light by various academic papers and surveys mentioned in the previous chapter (see chapters 2.2 and 2.3). The point of this study is not to discard any merits of Erasmus or suggest its complete replacement. Instead, it aims at shedding more light onto programmes which receive less attention and funding than Erasmus and encouraging their coexistence on more equal grounds, as the programmes could complement each other and manage to spread identity to a wider range of people. Therefore, the final chapter of this paper will be dedicated first to an explanation of why the programme deserves more attention; then to a comparative examination of ESC and Erasmus, with descriptive elements about the functioning of ESC and finally, the last part will regard a qualitative study of the experience of ex-participants of the ESC programme in relation to their European identity.

3.1. Reasons to study the European Solidarity Corps

The European Solidarity Corps as a programme is worth analysing for multiple reasons. First, it is a relatively new programme, therefore its potential has not been fully discovered. ESC was launched by the European Commission in 2016 (Chircop 2021). It was created as a successor of the European Voluntary Service (EVS). ESC as an initiative has the overall goal of providing a framework for non-formal education and for the expression of European solidarity by creating new opportunities for the European youth through volunteering, employment, and traineeships (Civico 2017, Munta et al. 2022). Volunteering regards various areas such as:

> (...) integration of migrants, environmental challenges, prevention of natural disasters, education and youth activities, preservation of cultural heritage,

humanitarian aid. It also supports national and local actors, in their efforts to cope with different societal challenges and crises. (European Union 2023).

Since the projects are relatively new, there is very little academic literature about ESC, especially if compared to the impressive number of studies conducted about Erasmus. Another reason why there is less literature on ESC, could be the fact that, unlike Erasmus, it deals with non-formal education. Some of the existing literature on ESC speak rather about the skills which might be acquired through volunteering, but not the impact the ESC could have on the European identity of participants (Munta et al. 2022). This academic lacuna is a second reason why it might be beneficial to analyse ESC. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the availability of research on this overlooked area. The study of ESC can be also justified by the fact that, as Munta et al. (2022) claim, volunteering activities are the second most important way of building European identity within the youth, after the formal education programmes like Erasmus. Furthermore, the area of non-formal education is potentially more promising than formal education because formal education is an exclusive competence of the national governments. Therefore, the European Union has fewer means to influence formal education into creating a European identity among pupils and students. This is not the case if it comes to non-formal education, therefore, it is becoming a key measure for fostering European identity through solidarity and active civic participation (ibidem). The final reason why ESC is worth reviewing from the identity point of view is because the distinctiveness of ESC provides an alternative approach to spreading European identity. Therefore, the next section will provide detailed information about the ESC programme, while highlighting simultaneously how various features differ from Erasmus and how these differences might be beneficial to the development of European identity.

3.2. The comparison of Erasmus to ESC

The European Solidarity Corps is a framework of volunteering programmes dedicated to youth between the age of 18 to 30. The participants can come from the EU's member states and third countries associated to the programme[6] (European Commission 2023a).

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[6] The associated countries to ESC are: Iceland, Lichtenstein, Republic of North Macedonia and Türkiye. Additionally, the participants in some projects can come from countries which are members of the

The volunteering projects are a full-time unpaid activity which can last up to one year and regard various areas of solidarity: social inclusion, environmental protection, climate change mitigation and others (ibidem). The projects are put forward each year by organisations that want to host volunteers and are selected by Education and Culture Executive Agency, depending on the quality and relevance of the proposals.

Already this characteristic of the functioning of ESC highlights one crucial difference in comparison to Erasmus. The ESC framework is accessible to all European citizens from the age of 18 to 30. There is no other particular requirement for participation, unlike in the case of Erasmus, where to go on an exchange one must be enrolled on a higher education institution. This fact is of utmost importance because as it has been emphasised by some scholars (Kuhl 2012, Wilson 2011), the restricted target group of Erasmus is one of the main concerns. In case of ESC all young Europeans, regardless of their level of education, are eligible to apply for a volunteering opportunity. Furthermore, the volunteering opportunities can be obtained by youth at an early age, i.e. already at 18 years old. As Sigalas (2010) argued there is a tendency for mobility programmes to have a bigger impact on younger students. Therefore, the fact that 18-year-old Europeans can experience a solidarity project abroad, even before the usual age when the students enrol onto higher education institutes, is of great significance for the cause of fostering European identity. First, young Europeans can benefit from exposure to other European country's culture at the age when they are most likely to get influenced according to the European Union's interests. Second, they might even change their educational plans on the grounds of the ESC experience. For instance, after having faced living abroad at a relatively young age, the youth might consider doing their university degree in another European country, or in case of Europeans who do not plan on completing a higher education diploma, it might influence their professional career prospects.

As already mentioned, the volunteering projects can regard various areas and involve different activities, however, the consistent feature of all such projects is solidarity. Participants of ESC carry out their volunteering in relation to a local community in

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European Free Trade Association which are members of the European Economic Area, as well as, from candidate countries and potential candidate countries (European Commission 2023a).

which they live for the period of ESC and contribute to its development and well-being. As it is stated in the ESC guide for the year 2023:

> (...) a solidarity project should be directly linked to the local community they live in, although some of them can also tackle regional or even national issues. Some solidarity projects could also tackle common challenges identified jointly in the border regions. A Solidarity Project should have an impact on the local community by addressing local issues, targeting a specific group or developing local opportunities (particularly in communities located in rural, isolated, marginalised or cross-border areas) but also through involving different actors and developing new partnerships. Thus, by setting common goals and cooperating together to achieve them, communities can benefit from a solidarity project (European Commission 2023a).

The framework of ESC emphasizes the involvement of ESC participants in the local community. One of the main tasks of the hosting organisation during the volunteering period is to provide opportunities for the participants to integrate with the local community and facilitate such interactions. Additionally, the National Agencies, bodies responsible for managing the implementation of the ESC programme in each country, organise mandatory upon-arrival training. During the training, among other things, the participants acquire basic knowledge about the history, culture, society of the country in which they will live in, in order to facilitate their involvement into the local community. Hence, one can clearly notice the important role that integration into the local society plays in ESC projects. This point responds well to another limitation of Erasmus, found by Sigalas (2010), according to whom insufficient exposure to local communities during Erasmus contributed to limited development of a European identity.

Although the projects are realised in the form of unpaid volunteering, it does not mean that the participants do not receive any financial support. To avoid a situation in which the volunteers bear additional costs for the volunteering work, within the grant received by the hosting organisation from the European budget, a part of it is dedicated to providing appropriate working and living conditions for the volunteers. The participants are entitled to an accommodation, food, and a means of local transport, or a corresponding financial allowance to cover these needs. Additionally, participants receive a contribution to their daily personal expenses in the form of pocket money per

each day of volunteering. Finally, the travel cost to, and from the volunteering location are covered by the budget (European Commission 2023a). This makes ESC highly more accessible to the European youth than Erasmus. Apart from the resources to cover the travel expenses which do not exist in Erasmus, moreover, the system is oriented at supplying concrete living conditions, such as food and accommodation, rather than simply providing a fixed sum of money as a grant. Thus, the financial support is more accurate and covers the living cost in a more realistic manner. This is not the case in the Erasmus programme. Therefore, the participation in ESC does not entail much additional spending, what makes the programme highly more accessible than Erasmus. What should be kept in mind, however, is the scale of the two programmes. Erasmus budget is at the level of €26 billion, whereas, ESC received only €1 billion for the 2021-27 budget period. 270 000 participants are estimated to be able to participate in ESC within this time period (European Commission 2023a). In contrast, only in the year 2021, there were around 648 000 Europeans who carried out a mobility within the Erasmus programme (European Commission 2022). Thus, is it clear that the scale of ESC remains relatively small compared to Erasmus, so although the financial conditions make ESC accessible to less well-off Europeans, scale-wise, Erasmus remains more accessible.

The relatively small scale of ESC regards not only the budget and the number of participants, but the overall communication strategy and marketing of ESC projects. Although Erasmus suffers to a certain degree from a bad reputation, nevertheless, it is very known and therefore, the lack of knowledge about the programme itself does not constitute a barrier to participation. ESC, on the other hand, has a very low level of recognition. Few Europeans have heard of the ESC opportunity and in fact in the European Parliament's briefing by Chircop (2021) it is recognised that the 'programme suffered from unsuccessful branding and communication as it competed with other long-standing programmes that carried out similar activities'. Therefore, unless more work is done on the European Union's level to improve the marketing of ESC, Erasmus remains at an advantage if this criterion is concerned. Even if ESC could be more successful at spreading the European identity than Erasmus, all of ESC's benefits fade in relevance if the group which is reached is very limited.

All the above-mentioned observations and conclusions are based on the theoretical knowledge about the programmes, coming mostly from European Union's guidebooks and reports. However, out of recognition that the analysis based only on these sources of information has its shortcomings and might stray away from reality, the next section of this chapter will be based on an empirical study. It takes the form of a survey carried out among former participants of ESC projects with the aim of comparing their experience to the theoretical knowledge about ESC.

3.3. The survey with ESC participants

3.3.1. Methodology of the questionnaire

The questionnaire and its analysis have the form of qualitative research. The questionnaire has been answered by 35 ex-ESC volunteers coming from different European countries. The volunteers have been contacted through various networks and platforms bringing together former ESC participants (e.g. national networks of EuroPeers, Facebook interest-groups...). The questionnaire contained mostly open-answer questions where the volunteers could anonymously express their views on topics related to this research question, such as the definition of European identity, the influence of ESC on their European identity, the accessibility of ESC projects from the financial point of view, and others. The ESC participants who declared to have also done an Erasmus had a chance to compare the two experiences. The selection of relevant questions and the received answers can be found in the Annex 1. In the body of this thesis only certain questions and answers will be quoted to portray the participants attitudes and opinions. Due to a limited number of survey participants, it is recognised that the questionnaire cannot be considered solid evidence of certain tendencies. It will be used instead to present what range of perspectives can be encountered among ESC volunteers, and to build a foundation for further research.

3.3.2. Questionnaire analysis

The questions asked in the questionnaire can be divided into three categories. The questions about the ESC's accessibility, about the participants' European identity and finally comparative questions regarding Erasmus. Thus, the analysis of the questionnaire will follow the same trimodal structure.

The first part of questions included in the survey was meant to directly address the flaws of Erasmus mentioned in the chapter 3.2. and confirm, or deny the assumptions about ESC being able to address the weaknesses of Erasmus. As previously outlined, these included, financial inaccessibility, too restrictive target group and limited social interactions with the local community.

The questionnaire to some extent seems to confirm the observation that ESC in many aspects remains more accessible than Erasmus. If the financial accessibility is concerned, only 3 participants directly considered ESC inaccessible from the financial point of view. A participant from Spain who volunteered in France found the scholarship funding insufficient to sustain themselves and had to resort to terminating their volunteering project prematurely:

> *"This was the reason I stoped my project mid way. The amount of mony is very limited. It did not cover basic expenses and I would have to depend each month of the money my parents gave me, which was not sustainable, considering that we were in a full time job. A lot of other volunteers I've met are struggleling"* [7]

Apart from these single cases, the majority of participants found ESC accessible from its financial aspect, as the scholarship was considered enough to cover basic expanses. The opinions of volunteers diverge if it comes to the degree of how well the grant provided by ESC covered their expanses. Some participants mention they were able to travel within the ESC country and also cover the costs of extra activities apart from the volunteering. Others, instead claim that the scholarship money provided enough only for basic expanses, however, any additional activities like hobbies, travelling etc. had to be covered by their savings, the financial support of their parents, or any external sources of funding. It is worth highlighting that some participants mention as a factor that made the programme more accessible the fact that the accommodation and transport costs were covered by the hosting organisation, which is consistent with the assumption made in the theoretical part of this chapter.

However, some of the participants underlined that although the grant covered most of the expanses, the amount of money received did not make the programme itself fully

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[7] Any spelling and grammatical mistakes in the quoted questionnaire answers are due to the original spelling of the respondents.

accessible. A participant from Germany says: *"the money definitely makes the ESC more accessible but at the same time definitely not accessible to everyone"*. They underline that participating remains a great privilege. Similarly, a participant from France brings up one more issue of accessibility which is the awareness about ESC: *"I think the problem is more that the program is not so well known and there is fear of not being able to live abroad or not being good enough, so the problem is definitely not so much about the money"*. Finally, also a participant from Poland concludes: "*Money won't ever make it accessible for everyone. Those programs even if they are meant to be for everyone, they are only promoted in towns and cities. I think there is a huge geographic disadvantage when it comes to ESC and no money can solve it"*. Therefore, it can be deduced that although ESC solves the issue of financial inaccessibility which was encountered in the case of Erasmus, it is still subject of other limitation such as marketing and insufficient publicity, especially in rural areas. On a more positive note, another ESC participant from France assesses that although the ESC money is not enough to make the programme accessible to everyone it is still *"a really good step, and most people that would consider going abroad for a period of time can participate"*, therefore, if the issue of public awareness was addressed by the EU and acquaintance with the ESC programme increased, ESC could serve more efficiently the purpose of spreading European identity.

The next issue concerning Erasmus was the limited target group. ESC could potentially solve this issue because the participation is open to all European youth, not only university students. However, out of all questionnaire participants, only 3 of them did not complete higher education studies. Most of participants obtained a university degree either before the ESC project, or planned on enrolling in a higher education institute after the ESC and treated the volunteering as a gap year between their studies. This, therefore, confirms a concern brought up by one of the participants in the previous paragraph. Although theoretically the ESC programmes are available to everyone, often the participants end up being ex-students or soon-to-be students. Although the survey is not a big scale analysis and the overall ratio of participants with various backgrounds can differ, the fact that this concern has been brought up by one of the ESC participants allows to infer that this tendency appears also

on a larger scale. ESC volunteers get to meet other volunteers within the same country and create a network of acquaintances thanks to the trainings organised by the National Agencies. Such trainings take place twice, the first time upon arrival, and the other, mid-term of the project, therefore, volunteers get to meet and hear about the experience of dozens of other Europeans in their same situation. Therefore, the questionnaire partially reflects not only their own experience, but also the knowledge about the experiences of the entire network.

Moreover, it is doubtful whether ESC can truly constitute an alternative to Erasmus for those Europeans who do not study at a higher education institute, because, basing on the question about whether the ESC participants already participated in an Erasmus, or were planning on doing so in the future, it turns out that for many of them, both of the programmes were an opportunity they wanted to take part in. Therefore, ESC in many cases becomes an additional experience to those Europeans who already took part in another EU initiative.

The final concern about Erasmus, brought up by Sigalas (2010), was the low level of interaction with local communities of the destination country. Thus, another question of the survey aimed at defining the types of interactions the ESC participants had during their volunteering and at determining whether the overall EU objective to provide a framework for integration and solidarity with local community is effectively realised during the ESC projects.

The answers of the participants regarding their interactions with local communities can be summarised by dividing them into 3 categories: participants who made friends with locals, participants who interacted with locals, however, only in the framework of their volunteering activities, and participants who interacted and became friends only with other volunteers and foreigners. This shows that there is no consistent success of ESC at integrating the participants into the local society. However, it still seems to bring improvements compared to Erasmus. This divergence of answers could be explained by the vast variety of projects, the conditions in which they take place, and other individual predispositions of participants. Nevertheless, apart from the differences between each category of the answers, there are also some other findings within each answer-group. It comes to attention that those participants who

interacted with local communities mention different social and age-groups (children, students, adults), therefore the interactions seem to have been varied. Some participants perceived the interactions with local communities as an added value of ESC, because, as a volunteer from France says: "*(...) local volunteers (...) made the ESC richer by allowing us to connect to the country more deeply*". A Polish volunteer in Germany who interacted mostly with Germans from Bavaria noticed it had an impact on their general perception of Germans since they: "*(...) shared more than I would ever expect, starting from religion, ending with our love for same type of food*".

Regarding the group who interacted mainly with other foreigners, it is mostly explained by the ease of making friends with other people in the same position and a certain barrier to meeting the local people. Nevertheless, some participants who did not connect deeply with the locals express a regret about the limited circle of social interactions. A volunteer from Estonia, based on their experience, gathers that there is a general limitation to the ESC volunteering:

> "*I think that's actually a big problem about ESC that volunteers are likely to just hang out with other volunteers instead of the local people. I had that problem and actually regret it a lot that I didn't make many connections with local French people*".

Another participant from France confirms this observation by saying: "*(...) it is true that when doing a team volunteering project, we tend to stick together and don't meet many local people. It happened of course, but it definitely is not something I experienced a lot*".

Therefore, ESC does not resolve the concern about the lack of social interactions with local communities to the full extent, and there is some room for improvement. Nevertheless, it seems to be a step forward compared to the Erasmus experience.

3.3.3. Other findings of the survey

Apart from contributing to verifying some of the differences between ESC projects and Erasmus, this questionnaire was useful also for other purposes. Apart from addressing

the accessibility concern itself, the participants were inquired directly about their European identity. The survey recorded if they felt European to begin with, and if not, for what reasons. In the cases of participants who declared to feel European, the questionnaire compared their level of Europeanness prior to, and post the mobility experience. Finally to address the question researched in the first chapter of this paper, i.e. the definition of the European identity, the participants were asked to explain how they define and perceive their own identity. Therefore, this section will concentrate on the findings of the questionnaire about the European identity of the participants.

Out of 35 participants only 2 of them declared to not feel European. One of them felt as if the European identity was too "*reductive and limited in some respects*" and declared to feel as a citizen of the world. This corresponds to the findings of the general tendencies in the European Union (see chapter 1.4) according to which the youth is less inclined to identify with a specific collective group. Another participant, instead, stated that they did not feel European because despite being Portuguese, they lived most of their life in Brazil. Apart from these 2 cases, the rest of participants declared to have a European identity.

Those who feel European were asked to compare their level of Europeanness to their level of European identity before the mobility opportunity. 13 of them did not notice a change in the level of their self-identification with Europe before and after an ESC. 20 of the participants recognise their European identity grew after the ESC. Out of these 20 participants, only 4 of them stated an absolute growth, from having no European identity before ESC, to having one after the volunteering. Therefore, in this sample of participants who were interviewed, it seems that ESC, although it was meant to solve the flaws of Erasmus, in reality, suffers from the same problematic, i.e. it attracts mostly Europeans who already identify with Europe to some extent.

The survey served also the purpose of confronting the academic attempts to define the European identity presented in the chapter 1.2., and the perception of the European identity by the European youth. The definitions of their European identity proposed by the participants lead to the identification of the most important factors in the perception of the European identity by the youth. The most often mentioned elements as foundation of the identity were: interpersonal relations with other Europeans, cultural similarity,

and values. Notably, one of the volunteers states that their feeling of being European is contingent on being surrounded by other Europeans and being abroad because:

> *"I actually didn't think or didn't feel European since I finished the volunteering experience. It all comes when I'm sharing my life with people from other places. That is basically it. I feel European, and I think about being European, when I'm socialising with other European people".*

Therefore, it does not seem that the enhanced European identity during the ESC always translates into a higher level of European enthusiasm and a higher support for the European Union as a political project. In fact, a fraction of volunteers directly denied their European identity being associated with a political affiliation to EU. Another volunteer stated that they are opposed to the idea of using the adjective European in reference to the EU only, and underlined that *"Europe is much more than that"*. Finally, a last remark which is relevant to the topic of this thesis is a comment from a French volunteer who noticed the difference between the levels of self-identification with other Western Europeans and with Eastern Europeans and declared that the bond with other Western Europeans was stronger. This proves that the argument about the growing diversity within the Union being a setback to further integration (Aleknonis 2022, Karlsson 1999) has some grounds in the empirical evidence as well.

Finally, the ESC participants were inquired if their lives changed in any way post the mobility experience. A vast majority declares that their life got influenced by ESC. A reoccurring change is a new consideration of moving abroad for any further life developments, such as work or study. Another frequent remark is personal growth and more courage to take upon new challenges which could involve diversity and interculturality. Some volunteers changed their professional perspectives. A volunteer from France is considering working in education and humanitarian aid; another volunteer from Spain expresses willingness to work for the European institutions.

Remarkably, it seems that the volunteers are more prone to admit realistic influence of ESC on their life, rather than the idealistic change in their identity. It could be so, because there is still a certain level of scepticism of youth towards the European identity, or any collective identity in general. However, one can argue that the realistic

influence over Europeans' lives, which makes them more open-minded and willing to go abroad to other European countries or to interact with other Europeans, is more crucial than a recognition of the European identity itself. The shift in the practical perception of the possibilities that stand ahead of ESC participants and their new attitude towards mobility and other Europeans, not only is more important for the actual benefits of the European Union, since it encourages more integration and cross-border mobility, but also because it can be an unconscious reflection of the growing European identity, even among the citizens who are reluctant to consider having one. As it has been suggested in the chapter 1.2, the overly-restrictive attempts to define European identity and to pinpoint it to the political affiliation and civic engagement, can be counterproductive and bring the opposite effect to the desired one, as such politicised attitudes of the European Union can be perceived negatively by less EU-enthusiastic parts of the society. Therefore, even if the results of various surveys post-mobility do not reflect a consistent growth of the European identity of the participants, the effectiveness of such programmes should not be automatically discarded. The European identity could be associated not only with official identity declaration but also with shifts in the behaviours of the Europeans.

3.3.4. Comparison of Erasmus and ESC

As the last part of the questionnaire, the surveyees who declared to have participated both in an Erasmus and an ESC were asked to compare the two experiences. The main tendency is that the participants found the two programmes different, however, being equally useful due to their distinct objectives. There was one opinion, however, which addressed the issue of the inclusiveness of ESC, and shed more light onto how some participants might perceive ESC. A participant from Poland in Germany considered the environment of ESC more radical, more EU-oriented and, therefore, less inclusive towards people from various backgrounds. This volunteer states that Erasmus in fact had a more positive impact on their European identity because they experienced less external pressure to fit into a certain image of a European and this allowed them to feel closer to other Europeans in the Erasmus programme. This response in the questionnaire brings up an important conclusion and, at the same time, a problematic of spreading the European identity. It is undeniable that the European Union is associated with certain political views and values, and therefore, can be unappealing to some Europeans who

have other beliefs and outlooks on the world. In such a case, a programme like ESC, clearly oriented towards specific ideas like solidarity, respect for diversity etc., might be perceived by some as too political. As already mentioned in the previous paragraph, Euroscepticism and, consequently, an overly politicised concept of the European identity can be in fact an obstacle to spreading the European identity. If one considers, on top of that, that ESC is mostly known in a very restricted group of people with a rather European mindset, it comes as no surprise that ESC can appear inaccessible and therefore can fail to fulfil the objective of spreading the European identity among new members of the European society.

The conclusions from the above questionnaire can be such, that although theoretically ESC constitutes a good alternative to Erasmus and could close gaps of Erasmus programme's imperfection, in reality, ESC falls short of being fully accessible. The main issue seems to be not the financial accessibility itself, or the target group, but the promotion of the programme and the ideas associated to it. By being more versatile and actively marketing ESC to less European-enthusiast groups of society, it could perhaps bring better results. In any case, this will require more growth of ESC with adequate adjustments to effectively serve the EU's purposes.

4. Conclusions

In today's Europe, where two opposing dynamics are shaping the political landscape of the European Union, on one hand advancing integration and on the other growing Euroscepticism, the concept of European identity has gained importance. The employment of the collective identity in shaping new generations of EU supporters has been translated into numerous European initiatives with the scope of strengthening the European identity. Yet, one can encounter a growing number of studies which call into question the effectiveness of these endeavours. Hence, this study undertook the task of assessing the EU's attempts in fostering a collective identity. It assumed an analytical approach to the most well-known EU programme, i.e. the Erasmus programme and compared it to an alternative programme: European Solidarity Corps.

To be able to do so, initially, the paper sought to define the European identity based on sociological perspectives on the concept of identity itself. This led to the conclusion that European identity constitutes a collective identity, and due to certain intrinsic characteristics of a collective identity, such as collective agency, it could serve the objectives of the European Union. This thesis identified that some of these objectives are: bringing more equality and civic engagement to the European society, counteracting the rising populist movement and ensuring a steady level of support for the political project of the EU.

Although the definition of the European identity as a collective identity was rather straightforward, it became more challenging to distinguish a particular foundation for the European identity. Based on various academic papers the considered options were: cultural and historic similarity, geographic vicinity, common values and ideals, and finally the political dimension of the Union. The fact that these elements majorly overlap rendered it impossible to define the European identity in one distinct manner. Instead, this paper applied the approach of a broad definition where any degree of each of the possible elements was accepted as a potential definition. It was decided so for two reasons. First, because a collective identity is a form of self-perception, therefore, it can vary from one individual to another; and second, because from the EU's perspective, it is unpropitious to excessively restrict the European identity to a specific set of criteria.

Having established that, the paper went on to analyse the problem based on a real example of an EU initiative, i.e. Erasmus. The overview of literature about Erasmus allowed to establish that by some scholars Erasmus is considered ineffective at spreading European identity. The ineffectiveness is mainly not due to the formula of the programme itself, since generally cross-border mobility could work as a basis to cultivate the European identity, but because of its inaccessibility to a wide range of people. Hence, the paper attempted to outline what are the main barriers to participation in the project to have a footing for further evaluation of the European Solidarity Corps as an alternative. The main reasons for Erasmus inaccessibility are as follows: the target group of the programme being mainly restricted to university students; its financial inaccessibility and insufficient quality communication about Erasmus. Additionally, the programme does not provide a clear framework for exchanges with local communities.

Based on these points, European Solidarity Corps was examined in the last chapter. The analysis was grounded both in theoretical descriptions of the programme, and an empirical study of ex-ESC participants in the form of a questionnaire. The result of this comparison was the conclusion that although theoretically ESC has good grounds to spread the European identity, and could potentially close the gaps to the Erasmus' shortfalls, in reality, it remains not developed enough to be considered truly successful at spreading European identity. It certainly is more financially accessible than Erasmus, however, if the participants' background is taken into account the programme does not seem to reach a significantly wider range of Europeans than Erasmus. So although there is a theoretical possibility for various Europeans to participate, it is not the case. Encouraging euro-sceptical citizens to participate in any European activities, even if they are financially accessible, remains a crucial challenge. Therefore, the EU should do a significantly bigger effort at trying to reach other parts of society, through promotion and education. Additionally, to address better this concern, the functional framework of ESC could be adjusted, to partially prioritize accepting participants from less privileged social groups who usually tend to feel less European. On one hand, it is understandable that well-educated candidates with prior experience abroad are considered a better fit for the volunteering, however, on the other hand, if this scheme is not interrupted, it will be difficult to escape the European bubble and truly start spreading the European identity on the big scale. Thus, the European Union would need to define their main priority of such projects as Erasmus or ESC, whether it is the spreading of European identity, or the other respective objectives related to formal education and solidarity. Should the European identity take precedence, changes will be necessary.

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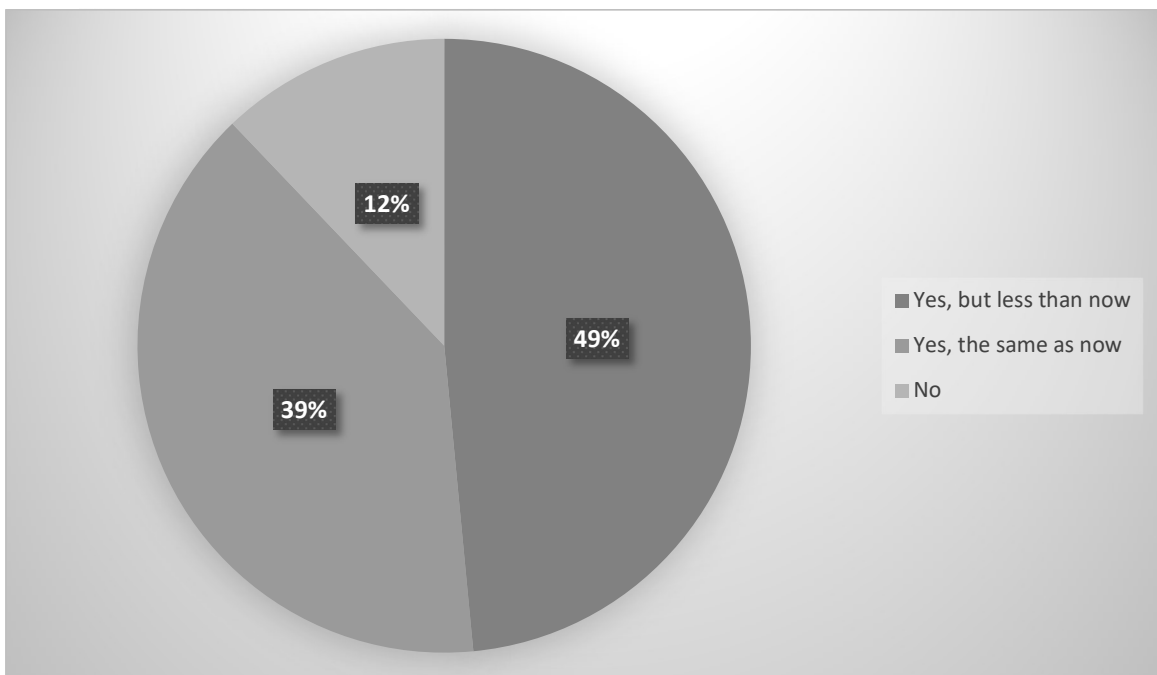
6. Annex

Annex 1: A selection of the survey questions and the answers

Source: own data collected through a questionnaire among ex-ESC participants

Do you feel European?
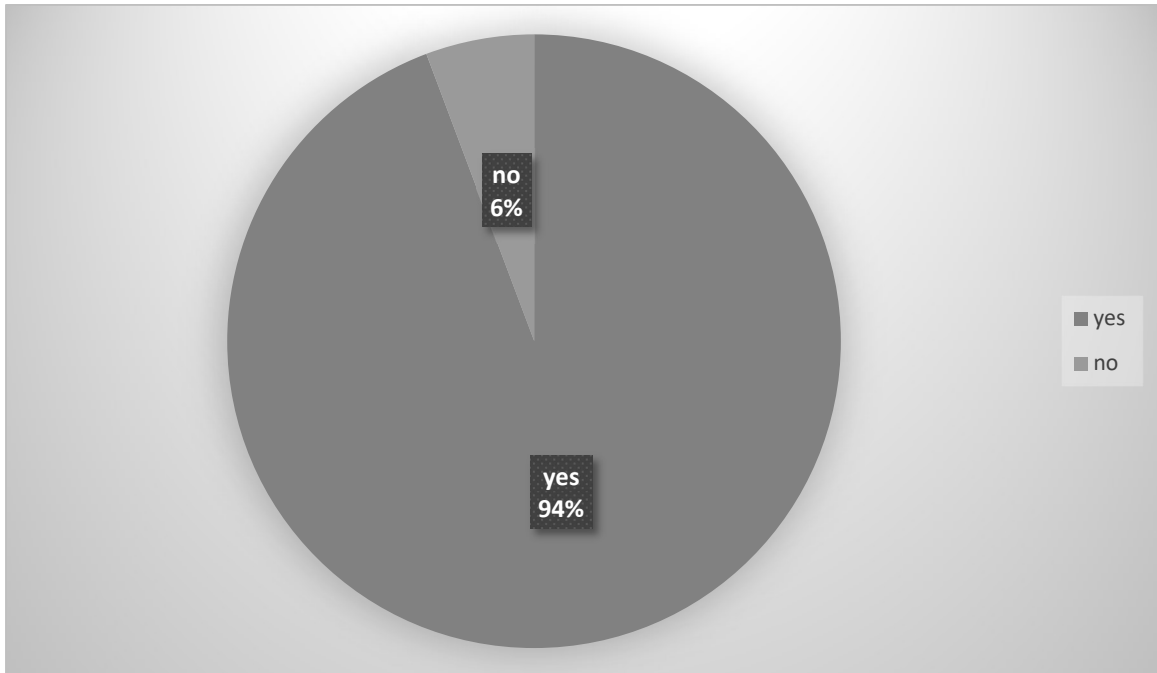
Did you feel European before your volunteering experience?

How did your volunteering change your European identity? What influenced it?

I actually think that before volunteering I had never thought about being European, and I never felt European either. Or at least, it was something that had never crossed my mind. In the end, when you are surrounded by people from different countries, you start to behave differently. Meaning that you forget about different aspects of your own culture, in my case Spanish culture. I don't really know how to really explain it, but you kind of melt with the others, and you discover that even though we are from different countries, we do have similar values. You focus in the similarities rather than the differences, and that's how I realised that we were to Spanish, Danish, Polish people; we were European. Different cultures and backgrounds, but as I said, practically the same values.

The contact with different people, allowed me to perceive my own European identity in broader terms. It also made me see I'm more capable of adaptation to different European environment than I thought. So, it highlighted in a way the less obvious links and similarities that exist between my nation and other European people, even though usually we tend to concentrate on differences.

It helped me to define what being European means. Also it rearranged my 'identity' ranking. Before I thought I felt Polish but actually seing that I've got more in common with some Hungarians than with most of the Warsaw inhabitants, helped me to understand that first I am from Podkarpackie, than I am European, and than, mainly by sharing language, I am also sorta Polish.

In Sweden other countries is a bit further off so it's not as simple to visit other places (in comparison with Central/Eastern European countries). People think of themselves more like Swedish than European. Living abroad made me feel more European because I was in more connection with other countries around Europe.

Actually the first thing that comes to mind is the war in Ukraine, because it influenced my volunteer experience a lot. I was surrounded by an international community, so I got to share thoughts and discuss with a lot of other Europeans about the war and also east-west relations, national identity etc. It made me feel a much stronger connection to my Eastern European friends who were all going through similar feelings, but I also felt more alienated than ever from Western

Europeans and realized that there are many variations to what Europe, European values etc actually mean. I don't think this realization would have been as strong if I hadn't moved abroad. Other than the war, obviously I was happy to share my culture and learn about others', but I'm not sure if that had a significant effect on me being European - I've always had a strong sense of European identity, I think.

I feel like it gave me more of a specific image what being a European is because you meet all these people from other european countries. So the topic gets discussed a lot more than at home in your home country where you have your own nationality.

Well, I can say I definitely felt my European identity when Russia invaded Ukraine. I have friends on both sides and it was a punch in the stomach. If I had not volunteered with the ESC, I would, without any doubt, would have cared less about it.

I felt more connectedness towards young people from other countries. It showed me, that young people from other countries can have the same ideas and might be similar to me.

Now, I have friends from all Europe. I am more concerned about European decisions and I am more concerned about notions such as equality, respect, and liberty.

Making friends from different countries made the "list of European countries" I had learned in school so much more real, it finally meant something

the exchange with people from other European countries, also meeting people from the USA and realise how easy it is to to travel in the Eu

I have much more respect for language and understand that people are friendly and like minded in all parts of Europe (and the world).

Knowing people from different backgrounds I realised that we Europeans have a significant amount of things in common.

I got to live with people from different countries of Europe and learn about their cultures, traditions and lives

meeting other young people from all around the world helped me realize what it is making me feel European

A lot, it allowed me to push myself to travel the world and confort myself about my skillness

Meeting other people from Europe. Living in another country and it turning into your home.
Listening to other peoples stories about their backgrounds, how they grew up, etc.
Living with other volunteers from different countries

How would you define your European identity? What is it based on?

Cultural inheritage (history, music, movies, dances). Institutions that i have experienced since i am born. Some interpersonal skills such as communication, feminist views. But i would say that this feeling is probably stronger with people from western europe than with eastern europe countries. For example, i've noticed several differences with my colleague from Bulgaria.
I define European Identity as feeling at home and in a certain way belonging, no matter which country one is in. Despite many differences between all the European countries and nations, there is always something in common - be it a different variation of your favorite dish from home, similar architectural style, music known by everyone, or shared values.
I see the EU as important instrument to get European citizens from all the countries in touch in order to enable them to exchange their experiences, their culture an their language. So this is what my identity is based on: exchange! But als European values such as peace, freedom, unity and democracy.
I think it's because I have the possibility to travel so much and discover a lot of different places. Everywhere I go I feel a little bit like at home.
I love the concept of EU. I feel Europe has lots of similar values and bases (like philosophy, christanity etc.).
My European identity is based on common targets (peace, democracy and inclusion among European Nations
Interpersonal relations (having friends from all over Europe), and also sharing values
Universal values and interpersonal relations
Culture and history
Cultural reasons
Definitely not political affiliation to the EU. My European identity is from traveling

and meeting people from Europe. You feel that togethernis when building relationships with other people. They become friends, even family, so you feel like you are from the same place more or less. But there is no European identity, as "people from Europe" are so heterogene and there is so much cultural diversity. We are family and yet not family. From the same place and yet not at all
European values and interpersonal relations
Balkan european greek
Interpersonal relations
This is a really difficult question for me. I don't even think it would be possible for me to define my European identity. I actually didn't think or didn't feel European since I finished the volunteering experience. It all comes when I'm sharing my life with people from other places. That is basically it. I feel European, and I think about being European, when I'm socialising with other European people.
I think that even though Europe is very diverse we are also a bit similar in behavior and many countries share similar food/languages etc. but it depends, it can also be very different. We have a lot of free movement within the countries and many relationships cross-country. But it is a tricky question. It is mostly a feeling, being European.
I'd say the cultural similarities, play an important role, however, the interpersonal relations made me feel the closest to other Europeans. Thanks to seeing through real interactions how similar we are in many things, and how well we can get along together, I felt more as a part of a bigger community.
For me it is based on the interpersonal relations and freedom to go into the different EU conutries without issue. Also to have the opportunity to join various initiatives, like ESC or DiscoverEU, is contributing to the feeling of a European Identity.
We prioritize health and a somewhat forward looking political views that are quite different from other countries outside of the Union. However, I do think we also have a paternalistic stand point in regards to other regions (specially Africa)
My European identity is based meanly on the interpersonal relationships that I had through and after doing volunteering. That gave me a bigger understanding on what is to being European amd the richness of all the different cultures combined
In the experience i ve made it s the cultural similarities i have and am experiencing in

the european countries I d say the EU helps a lot to even have an image of what basic rights and values are defined in Europe, like a guideline
With my travel abroad inside Europe, my new European friends, my open-mindedness to new culture and difference, my knowledge on somes important date, and the commun point with several countries.
Mostly geography because we live close to each other and politics because we work so much together, but culturally I don't really feel closer to Europeans than to people from other continents
As cultural and historical reasons but I don't define that being european allow us to have the power on others countries
Common vision of peaceful future, common goals. I don't like when 'european' is used to describe only European Union. Europe is much more than that.
The people. I'd say it's all about the people. But also values such as democracy and progress.
- living in a democracy - no international borders - diversity
A small nation with a lot of culture and music
mainly interpersonal relations
Geographical proximity, shared history, similar cultures, similar ideal future to strive towards.
by the culture
Interpersonal relations

Why did you decide to volunteer within ESC?

I wanted to have a gap year, to have time to consider new possibilities for my future in a different environment and to learn new things.
I took a gap year between my Bachelor and Master degree. During that time I wanted to do something different and since I've been volunteering in different ways for most of my life doing an ESC seemed to be a natural choice for me
Because it's great opportunity to learn new language, to share your own culture and contribute to the society, feeling or not European, it's not right question, we all need yo work and respect each other

Burnout
Personal growth
To discover EU and to be able to experiment myself trought a volunteering project
Because I found the program attractive
Wanted to feel useful, to help where it's needed, to travel and meet new people, and to acquire new skills
I wanted to have an international experience, and was tired of the life in my home town.
Was on a gap year from uni and didn't know what else to do
1)I wanted to experience working/volunteering for a small ngo. At that time, i wanted to work for an ngo as a living. 2) i wanted to spend some time abroad learning a new language and practicing English 3) before going to Greece, I had an experience in Uruguay which was not as "good" as i would have it to be. I wanted to live a new experience abroad. 4) to discover Greece. It was my first time there.
I got to know some people doing it where I lived and seeing their projects inspired me since it seemed like they had such a nice time, learned a lot and made friends from all over Europe. Also, the program in itself is so accessible for everyone financially which definitely helped to open up this possibility for me.
Because I wanted to go abroad after high school and meet new people from other countries
I needed an internship to finish my undergrad, and volunteering was an option.
To gain work experience, still working in the same field
Improve my language skills and do social work
My project is really interesting.
To learn French and get professional experience
I wanted to go on a new adventure and meet new people. Additionally I wanted to improve my language skills.
To change my life
To get some different experiance than studying, meet people, learn languages
because its an easy way to live one year abroad and wanted all the other options would have been more complicated and I already knew a few people who have done it and

they always told me how amazing it was
Best option to go abroad for volunteering in a not englisch speaking country
money reasons, variety in projects
to make a new experience, get out of the comfort zone and get to know a new culture
Wanted to study French and experience living in a new country. After graduating high school I didn't have a lot of money, so ESC seemed like the perfect opportunity to try out living abroad for a year for a reasonable price. The initial idea came from a friend who also did an ESC in France.
I always wanted to do volunteering and the opportunity came after finishing my master's degree during Covid when it was really difficult to find a job in my field
I wanted to travel and meet new people while making an impact
I wanted to live abroad
To improve the french language, have an international volunteering experience.
Cause I had previous experience with training courses
Covid was hitting at the time and I had nothing to do with my life. A friend told me about ESC and volunteering and I decided to apply since I found it really interesting and there were amazing topics as well.
After finishing high school i wanted to go abroad to have some time 'off' school and enjoy that time abroad travelling, learning/improving my language skills and understanding of another culture while i m there.
I wanted to live in another country and experience the culture at an affordable cost and to meet people

How would you describe your interactions with other Europeans during your volunteering? Was it mostly with other young people or also adults? Other foreigners or local people?

I've interacted with other volunteers who were doing their ESC in the same city as I did (throughout the year a total of around 50 people), as well as the local community - local volunteers and the kids we've worked with. We've been spending most of our time together - living in a big house, working at the same office/organizing the same events, and hanging out in our free time. As time went by we bonded and unintentionally

became a sort of family,. Since I did my ESC during Covid (also during lockdowns) my contact with the local community and volunteers from other cities/organizations has been limited. I've also had contact with adults from other organizations we were cooperating with on some events.

Since i was living in a pretty small town (20 000 inhabitants) i was concerned before going, whether i would get in touch with people at all Living in a shared flat with other 2 international volunteers made things easier in the beginning and through an event of our youth service we got to know a lot of people in the beginning. So I was lucky to get 'adopted' by local french students. The cotact with thr other volunteers was also always there akd i have to say it is so mich easier to get in contsct with them because they re living the same thing and experiencing the same (language/ culturewise). Overall i m happy to have both of the bubbles around me- the local one and the international one.

Well, i was in a big city (Thessaloniki) among a lot of Erasmus students. I would say, it was easier for me to connect with those students as i was sharing a flat, having parties, going on holidays, etc with them. I have also met many other volunteers with whom i became friend. The people from my local social network were mainly international and young. I had one strong connection with one greek woman who was working in my NGO. I'm still in touch with her. I tried to connect with more greek people (other youngs or my tutor) but it was more difficult (cultural differences, schedule problem)

I started ESC when I was 28 and am now 30. So, most of the volunteers I worked with were younger and I loved it, because it put me in a position I never was before : passing my life experience while learning so much from younger ones. Of course, there were still projects in which I met people around my age. No matter the age, I always love meeting new people. However, it is true that when doing a team volunteering project, we tend to stick together and don't meet many local people. It happened of course, but it definitely is not something I experienced a lot.

Difficult to answer because everyone I met that year was European.. so at work my colleagues were adults and young adults, but I also spent time with children and teenagers. In my free time I was mostly with young adults who were also ESC volunteers. I think that's actually a big problem about ESC that volunteers are likely to just hang out with other volunteers instead of the local people. I had that problem

and actually regret it a lot that I didn't make many connections with local French people :S

In general, my interactions with other Europeans were always really interesting and meaningful. We were sharing a lot of things and learning from each other. I mainly had conversations with adults (if we understand adults as people over 18 yo), but also with young people from the local community. I had mainly interactions with foreigners but also some local people, but they were mainly related to the project (coordinators and other local volunteers).

My interactions were mainly with other volunteers. We had foreign volunteers but also local ones that introduced me to other locals of the community and allowed me to experience some very local experiences. The work we were doing in the project with locals were with children so I didn't got to interact that much with adults apart from my lovely coordinators

I interacted a lot with people from various age groups. Both with youth, but also adults. It was a really interesting experience and made me meet people also from different social groups than myself, so it really opened up my perception of French people and how much they can vary within one nation.

Other foreigners just as other volunteers that are in the same region in France or that I met at the seminars. With local people mostly at work - so on the one hand the children and on the other hand the teachers. I also find a sports group of local adults.

It was mostly with other young people. The coordinators of our association were adults and I also got into contact with some children who joined the summer camps. However in the everyday life it was mostly young people between 18 and 30.

I had interactions with other volunteers, all around my age range and with locals, which were from an older generation. The bond was specially good with the volunteers, since they tend to be people with very aligned view of life.

I was mainly spending time with Germans from Bavaria and Frankonia and we understood each other without my problems. We shared more than I would ever expect, starting from religion, ending with our love for same type of food.

The exchange was mostly with adults my age or older than me. As I lived together with an international group the exchange happened on a daily basis, but also with the local community as we worked together from time to time.

I met a lot of people who were also doing an Esc. I also was around a lot of different people at work. Mostly it was young people and they were foreigners. Usually I was around local people when I was at work.
It was mostly with other volunteers from other countries and local NGO organisers I worked with. They were all incredibly friendly and open to making connections. Young adults between the ages of 18-35.
I had a lot of interactions with young people but also adults from the organisation. I was also working with more than 10 other volunteers coming from different countries
Mostly young people and mostly foreigners, but they were also local volunteers with us, and it made the ESC richer by allowing us to connect to the country more deeply.
My interactions were really great actually with the others volonteers. The space of discussion and the climate were confortable and confident.
all of it, I got to know other volunteers from 18 to 30 years old, and also I have found local friends in France and a lot of foreigeners
I had good contact in work, not friendly though. I became friends with other volounteers and language asistens (also from US).
I didnt get to know so many foreigners, since the vast majority of people i interacted with daily were local people
I made a truly strong friendship with my workmate, from Denmark. I learned a lot about her country and viceversa
Mostly young people and foreigners (other volunteers) but also some locals (organizers, trainers, schools)
I was open for everybody, but mostly discussed with my colleagues, flatmates and another volunteers
With many young people, mostly foreigners. But also locals. Some older local adults as well.
It was nice but sometimes I could feel the diferences of culture, namely economic levels
I talked to all categories of people. My project is an interaction in general.
It was with foreign people and young people adults and young.
mainly other young foreigners
Other participants mainly

Other young people
Always great

Would you say that the scholarship money provided by the EU made ESC accessible to everyone? Did the scholarship cover all your basic expenses?

Yes
Yes
Yes
Yes
I think that the money provided is good and makes it accesible to everyone, even though I think the money should be adjusted when it comes to territories that are part of a country but are far away. For example when it comes to France. It is not the same France country, than the islands that belong to them. The scholarship covered, fur sure, all my basic expenses and I even saved money.
Yes, specially because in Romania there's no Euro so the rate change from receiving the allowance in Euros helped and the cost of life were I lived wasn't too high. The money for sure covered the basic expenses and even allowed me to eat outside or travel a little around the country without being worried
This was the reason I stoped my project mid way. The amount of mony is very limited. It did not cover basic expenses and I would have to depend each month of the money my parents gave me, which was not sustainable, considering that we were in a full time job. A lot of other volunteers I've met are struggleling.
For me the money was good because I didn't have to pay for the accomodation or the food. I also got my traveling costs rembursed because it was under 275 € (approximately). However I can understand that for other people who come from further away it can be difficult if the costs are higher
I could have managed with the scholarship money but that would have meant that I would have had no money for leisure activities, hobbies, travelling. Most people I know had saved up or were receiving money from their parents to be able to profit from the full ESC experience.
Money won't ever make it accessible for everyone. Those programs even if they are

meant to be for everyone, they are only promoted in towns and cities. I think there is a huge geographic disadvantage when it comes to ESC and no money can solve it.
Nearly all my basic expenses were covered. I think the problem is more that the program is not so well known and there is fear of not being able to live abroad or not being good enough, so the problem is definitely not so much about the money.
Depends from the amount of.the.scholarship. For sure you need to have before you go save money cause otherwise it is impossible to.support only with the pocket money your time there. Of course it depends also the country that you will choose
I also get the German child benefit that comes from the state which helps me financially. Without it would have become more difficult for me, I guess. But normally you do not have to pay your apartment and your transport which is really good.
Yes, but I think for some people, who do not have savings before the ESC, the travel cost might be difficult to pay. For me it covered all my basic expenses and also my travel costs. And I even had some money leftover at the end
Yes it did, there was also some extra budget we could use for private projects. But at the same time I still had some additional income ('child money' from Germany), so i didnt have to live with the approx 450€/ month
the money definitely makes the ESC more accessible but at the same time definitely not accessible to everyone! participating still is a great privilege!! the money covered 3/4 of my expenses i think!
I don't think it's accecibke to everyone, but it's a really good step, and most people that would consider going abroad for a period of time can participate. It covered all basic expenses yes
Yes, I had enough to cover most of my expanses, even with additional travelling, so I had a chance to see other French cities while I was there.
Yes, it was enough to cover basic expenses but also allowed me to travel and see the country I was doing my ESC in.
Thankfully, i had some money from my parents otherwise it would have been more difficult to explore the country
It was enough to buy food and also do some fun activities. So I think it should be enough for most people.

yes, but I think it should be adjusted to each city, not country
Yes actually, it does, expect when you abuse of your expenses !
Oh - this is what I wrote before hehe! YES, definitely:D
I don't know about the mentioned scholarship.
Yes, it covered all the expenses
Yes, for me it's enough.
Yes to both questions
I did
Yes!

Did the ESC influence your life after in any way? (Did you move abroad, consider other opportunities...)

Just after doing my ESC, I stayed for 6 months at my hosting organization, which hired me as part of the trainers' team. After coming back home I have been working as a trainer/facilitator on the side and really got engaged in the non-formal education area - started cooperation with some youth centers at home, and organized workshops and events on my own. Additionally, I applied and got into the Train the Trainer Training Program in the Council of Europe, which I would have never applied for, was it not for my ESC experience
Not yet, but I'm definitely considering for my future working abroad.
It influenced my life for 3 years. I've learnt a lot from this experience, sure, but I don't feel like my life was influenced more than for example during Erasmus exchange.
I did all that befor esc
Yes I want to work at international level
I became more open towards opportunities abroad, especially also in Eastern Europe.
No
Not really.
Yes, it influenced my life to move abroad to another country in Europe that I normally wouldn't think about.
Yes, I would like to move abroad after finishing University
It made me realise that my time and effort is valuable and that I should not prolongue an

unfair work situation. I found a job partially thanks to the experience in the ESC.
It made me appreciate many things more. And also it made me want to go abroad some more.
yes it showed me that studies and jobs are not the most important things in life and since my esc I travel a lot
i moved abroad which was definitely influenced by my esc experiences!
Definitely am feeling more careful about moving abroad - I used to think I could easily adapt to any culture, but it turns out I do have some preferences and a culture very different from mine would probably be overwhelming for me to live in. I'm very thankful I found that out through ESC. In general, ESC made me also travel a lot more even after finishing my project - I now am used to the rush of discovering a new place and I am confident that I can handle any challenges that solo travel might bring.
Yes, the Erasmus mundus masters and the willingness to work for a EU institution
I met my boyfriend there
I did an internship as Erasmus+ project assistant with my host organisation. I also met my boyfriend during the ESC. After I finished my Bachelor's I moved to his country to be close from each other, I did an internship and started a Master's there.
Not really, my plan was to just spend a specific time period and not stay longer
Yes, it showed me my confidence and responsibility that I have outside my home town. Which I took with me from there on
Yes, since I moved abroad and reached for someone
Yes, I'm considering working in education and humanitarian aids
I worked for the french Erasmus+ national agency. In some way, it has influence my life.
After the ESC program I realized that I want to work in an association who hosts international groups and who supports the international friendship. I am currently thinking about moving away from my country.
Yes, I have decided to stay.
Yes i moved abroad
Yes, it broaded my horizons.
No.

For sure. After ESC I had the courage to move abroad to continue on living other cultures different from mine
Of course after esc I have moves outside of my country
I didn't move abroad in the end, but for sure thought about it after ESC. It also gave me the courage to take an English exam and thanks to that I found a job that I really like.
In so many ways! It helped me getting to know myself more and feel super confident and capable to do whatever I wanted to do. I also discovered that I loved everything about being a facilitator and considered to make it a carrier for me
I think that I look at things differently. I am more open minded right now and I am also a more social person. But the biggest difference for me is that I am not afraid of failure anymore and I enjoy life much more.
Talking about greece nearly every day since i have been there. Apart of this joke, it helped me to understand more intercultural exchanges in different contextes (work, friendly, love interest, etc).
Yes, since I listened to a lot of people life stories and learned so much about cultural backgrounds. ESC helped me a lot also with personal development and gaining strength
How has it not ? I know myself way better. I'm more open-minded, open to others and always ready to get out of a comfort zone
My relationship and my cultural confrontations that allow me to see the world differently
New language better life and lot of nice stuff
I became more independent and autonomous
I learned French language
I have found a boyfriend.
Personal developement
No

(A question to the participants who participated both in an Erasmus and ESC)

How would you compare your Erasmus and ESC?

The Erasmus programme is enriching, but not as the ESC is. An Erasmus project could be a first contact with moving abroad but you do not have many responsabilities to attend to. The ESC programme is way more lonely, since there are only a few young people in your situation.
it was very different. During ESC i learned a lot more practical skills rather than just theoretical univeristy knowledge. I also met a lot more different people during the ESC, as it involved not only the bubble of other university students.
Both were cool but both were also really different and comparing them would be like comparing ice cream for dessert and sandwich for breakfast. They both serve different purpose and they both served it well.
Erasmus: international environment at all times (living in a student residence for Erasmus, studying abroad...) ESC: local experience (I mostly got to expérience the culture of the country I'm living in)
The Erasmus allowed me to learn more about the host culture, while the ESC allowed me to learn more from the other volunteers culture
Its fairly similar I'd say in what it brings you. Enjoyed more my erasmus as there were more students and a bigger social life.
Both are very good experience but totally different. With ESC experience, I was more with local people.
My ESC was a first impression of what work like looks like
Study vs sharing
I think ESC almost made me radical in some ideas because other volunteers were mostly wokeist. On the other hand Erasmus helped me to understand that people in other countries are not all wokeist and they are not all so radical in their way of thinking which actually helped me to get some faith in the world again. I felt like during esc if we didn't share the same radical ideas, we would be judged as populist, far rightist etc while during Erasmus it was cool to see that people got balls to ignore certain issues and they were not called far rightist for simply ignoring existence of some issue. It helped me to feel more European in the way that I could feel closer to

people from different parts of the world. I didn't feel as if I have to earn the European identity during Erasmus and ESC was a bit like that. If I didn't go radically zero waste, it meant I didn't care for the planet, hence - not European. If I didn't know all the ways to call gender fluid people correctly - I'm not inclusive enough, hence not European. I mean, we should give people space to learn this kind of stuff and accept if they won't do it perfectly. There are too many things in the world that we could improve, one cannot do all of them perfectly at the same time. And perfectly being the key word here.

Mostly the same, but with ESC you have more time to integrate in local society-(long project).