



STUDENT FORUM  
MAASTRICHT

Policy Proposal on

# Bridging the Gap between the EU and its Citizens

How to (re-)establish trust in the EU among young  
Europeans

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**Authors:** Vincent Brenninkmeyer, Louis Geoffroy-Terryn, Sophie Henkel, Pauline Jerrentrup, Richard Marenbach, Giulia Pasquali, Mona Richter, Florian Saal, Felix Thiessen, Laurens van der Sluijs

**Tutor:** Dr. Heidi Maurer

**Topic Manager:** Maximilian Beck

# STUDENT FORUM MAASTRICHT

Student Forum Maastricht (SFM) is an annual student conference held at the Maastricht University Campus in Brussels. The conference is organised by students from Maastricht University in cooperation with different partner organisations. The participants are post- and undergraduate students from all over Europe with diverse academic backgrounds. Based on problem statements provided by European Commission representatives, they develop policy proposals for pressing topics within the Commission. In this process the students receive input and insights from experts from NGOs, academia and the business sector working in Brussels. The 2016 edition of SFM took place from 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> April. In four different working groups policy recommendations were drafted dealing with the following topics: EU Health Policy, Common Foreign Policy: Coordinating Humanitarian & Development Aid, EU- Union of and for Citizens, Gender Equality in the Labour Market. For more information on Student Forum Maastricht, please visit: [www.student-forum.eu](http://www.student-forum.eu).

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## Executive Summary

To establish trust between the EU and its citizens mere information campaigns are not sufficient. Furthermore, current programmes, which aim at creating European citizens are mostly directed at specific target groups and lack a holistic reach. We therefore propose for the EU to send a birthday card to each European when he or she reaches adulthood. This card should not only contain information about the next European elections but also include a travel voucher. This voucher allows Europeans to experience the benefit of free movement, which they owe to the EU. Moreover, the EU should make sure EU-funded projects are labelled (“branding”) as such and can thus contribute to establishing a link between the EU and its citizens, ultimately building trust.

## Introduction

A precondition for the legitimacy of the EU is trust in its institutions. However, according to Eurobarometer, defiance vis-à-vis EU institutions doubled between 2007 and 2013, marking a sharp rise from 32% to 60%<sup>1</sup>. This has widened the gap between the European Union and its citizens. We believe trust can be established by fostering knowledge about the EU through experiencing benefits at first hand. In addition, citizens need to associate these benefits with the EU itself. For instance, EU citizens should be made aware of the fact that they owe the advantage of free movement to the EU.

Furthermore, trust also correlates with voter turnout. Participation in the European Parliament elections is not only low (42.54% in 2014), but it has also drastically decreased over the years<sup>2</sup>, further reducing the EU’s legitimacy. According to Eurobarometer, the most important reason for low voter turnout lies in the lack of trust in the EU<sup>3</sup>. In the last EU Parliament elections, the largest group of abstainers consisted of young people, aged 18 to 24<sup>4</sup>, which raises severe concerns about the EU’s future legitimacy. Hence, an effective policy is needed to address the issue of trust, especially targeting the youth.

## Review of practices

In its effort to addressing challenges of including the youth in European policy agenda, the European institutions as well as third actors brought forward different initiatives, some of which are leading the way to promising action, yet lacking a wide reach.

### EU institutions engagement review

The EU provides assistance to youth mobility in the field of education. Erasmus+ projects provide incentives for citizens’ mobility, increasing their potential and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/record-60-of-europeans-tend-not-to-trust-eu/>

<sup>2</sup>

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/post/post\\_2014\\_survey\\_analitical\\_overview\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/post/post_2014_survey_analitical_overview_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*



strengthening the relationship between EU institutions and the youth<sup>5</sup>. Yet, well aware of the limitations of such initiatives, citizen initiatives such as 'Upgrade Erasmus 2.0'<sup>6</sup> aimed at improving connection between EU programmes and citizens. Nevertheless, and despite shared interest in improving mobility and quality of education among Member States, the initiative did not manage to yield sufficient support to concretise. Hence, a large share of EU citizens remains outside of the scope of action of most EU programmes.

Other measures, such as the European Voluntary Service (EVS), aim at developing opportunities for the youth (age 17-30) outside of the academic sphere. Ultimately, EVS enhances participants' professional and intercultural skills and vulgarises the exercise of EU mobility. Furthermore, the EVS initiative reminds of the existing capacities at the MS-level, to coordinate mobility incentives for the youth, and to mobilise stakeholders on European projects. Yet, in spite of communication efforts, prospective EVS partakers are more likely to already have knowledge about freedoms and EU policies; and to be involved in an educational, professional or vocational project, including commitments on the longer-term objectives (learning another language, acquiring professional skills). Hence, as much as EVS projects contribute to enhancing youth mobility, they do not address the trust-building requirement and necessary experiencing of Union freedoms and opportunities of the entire age-group.

EU initiatives and programmes targeting the field of education and professionalisation are well-endowed, rely on a long-lasting set of practices, stakeholders and enjoy increasing reputation. Nevertheless, they still fail to address the needs of citizens who lack contact with partner institutions. Furthermore, the lack of information and interest among the target group of this proposal, the occasional lack of resources to allocate sufficient means to attain policy objectives, as well as lack of engagement too often erect barriers diffusing opportunities of entire age-groups. In contrast, initiatives, which can be witnessed at the regional and national level, are of a more holistic approach, aiming at stimulating youth mobility and information for everyone.

### Third actor's engagement review

In the field of mobility, the Région Auvergne (FR)'s 'Open Tour' initiative<sup>7</sup> provides an interesting example. Residents were granted a free transport card in the summer of their eighteenth birthday. Limitations to such initiatives when transposed in different situations lie in the difficulty to comply with the principles of competition and free choice of service provider. This initiative offers the possibility for the youth to experience the services offered by the Region at first hand, by providing an additional

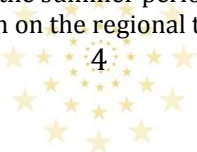
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<sup>5</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/>

<sup>6</sup> The 'Teach for youth - Upgrade to Erasmus 2.0' citizen initiative intends to fight educational inequality within the EU. Highly motivated and high-achieving recent college graduates and postgraduates teach in urban and rural low-income communities throughout the EU for one to two years.

<http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/initiatives/obsolete/details/2013/000005?lg=en>

<sup>7</sup> Open Tour Initiative: Mobility incentive in the summer period (June-September) allowing young residents (18-26) to travel without limitation on the regional train network (TER-SNCF).



incentive to use the service - with a financial subsidy to the measure. This action provides for a valuable best practice on stimulating citizen's mobility in a given entity. Yet, as much as implementing measures fitted the situation of a regional subsidy to an exclusive service provider, transposition of such practice at the European level, is made difficult by considerations of competition between service providers and the multiplicity of legal and technical frameworks involved.

Implementation practices providing greater flexibility are to be found in other fields of action. In Belgium for instance, the federal government grants 'Service Vouchers' (*Diensten-Cheques*)<sup>8</sup> to citizens facing particular situations, allowing them to freely choose on a list of recognised service providers to receive the service offered. Similarly, in Lithuania and Latvia, student grants and scholarships are granted in the form of education vouchers<sup>9</sup>. These examples provide this proposal with tangible implementing schemes, which have shown efficient in delivering policy objectives at various levels, involving diverse actors. Furthermore, the Council of Europe's Youth Card initiative<sup>10</sup> offers ready-to-use tools to the European youth to exercise freedoms and provides incentives to engage in continent-wide initiatives. Finally, the idea of a cross-border mobility incentive in the form of a free Interrail pass was first proposed by Vincent-Immanuel Herr and Martin Speer, as a way to foster European identity<sup>11</sup>.

## Policy Proposal: Call for Action

Trust in institutions and policies are central indicators for the political legitimacy of the EU. We believe that trust is generated outside the political, informational sphere. Consequently, early life socialisation has a greater impact on trust. More specifically, youngsters learn to trust and distrust through personal experiences. To regain trust in the Union's institutions, it is crucial for EU policy makers to create long-lasting links between young citizens and the EU. Existing youth-oriented EU initiatives have so far failed in (a) addressing the needs of citizens suffering from a lack of information and interest in EU politics, due to the complexity to reach; (b) providing citizens of a single age-group with evidences and opportunities to experience the freedom of movement and; (c) capitalising on existing initiatives and communicate positively in order to foster citizen's approval of EU policies.

Through this analysis, it becomes apparent that mere distribution of information is not sufficient to trigger the trust of young people. In order for citizens to become conscious of the impact of the EU's policies, this proposal suggests an increased incentive to

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.dienstencheques-rva.be/gebruikers/?lang=nl>

<sup>9</sup> European Development Fund, Working Paper 2014/21

[http://www.eif.org/news\\_centre/publications/eif\\_wp\\_21\\_students.pdf](http://www.eif.org/news_centre/publications/eif_wp_21_students.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Resolution ResAP(2003)

[https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?p=&Ref=ResAP\(2003\)1&Language=lanEnglish&Ver=original&Site=COE&BackColorInternet=DBDCF2&BackColorIntranet=FDC864&BackColorLogged=FDC864&direct=true](https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?p=&Ref=ResAP(2003)1&Language=lanEnglish&Ver=original&Site=COE&BackColorInternet=DBDCF2&BackColorIntranet=FDC864&BackColorLogged=FDC864&direct=true)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Traveling-for-Europes-future-HERRSPEER.pdf>

making use of the Union's freedoms, hence bringing the *acqui* down onto citizen's reality.

### Birthday Card

Therefore, there is a need for complementary youth policies, aiming at expanding concrete 'everyday life' possibilities of the European Union provides to each citizen's life through personal experience. To achieve this objective we propose that every European citizen receives a birthday card on the day he or she reaches adulthood. This card should not only contain information about the right to vote in the upcoming election but, probably more interestingly for the recipient, the opportunity to *experience* the benefits of the European Union in a very special way. It contains a mobility subsidy in the form of a EU-wide transport voucher as an opportunity and incentive to make use of the right to free movement.

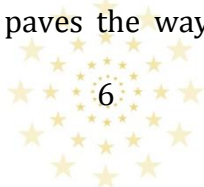
### Branding

It is essential to identify the EU with the programmes it initiates in order for young people to associate the role of the institutions with the benefits they receive as citizens. This can be achieved through 'branding'. Thus, we intend to promote the EU through the following formats. Erasmus is an opportunity for students to discover Europe while studying abroad. Thus, the EU as sponsor should become more visible as such. The EU's name and logo should be clearly visible on the transaction details. Our proposal assumes that branding is beneficial to promote the advantages of the European Union to its young citizens. Furthermore, this same principle of 'branding' shall also be part of our proposal regarding the birthday card and transportation voucher. Branding intends to stimulate people's curiosity vis-à-vis the EU and to provide incentives to engage.

Unlike projects already in place, this proposal addresses all future European voters, irrespective of their social and economic status. The birthday card with brief information about elections and the freedom of movement provides basic knowledge to the target group. The positive framing of information materials with an attractive element - the opportunity to travel - will increase the likelihood of young citizens to engage in active information acquisition. This stems from our conviction that people should experience the European Union rather than just receive information. First-hand experience adds a personal dimension to the abstract concept of the European Union. Adding to that, travelling across borders includes positive side effects, such as changes of attitude in prejudiced mind-sets and cultural exchange. Ensuring that the target group connects their experiences with the European Union will have a major impact on European awareness and thus benefit the Union and its institutions in the long run.

### Conclusion

We observe a lack of trust in the European project, especially among the youth. This proposal marks a unique opportunity for the European Commission to target those who will shape the future of the EU. It paves the way to gaining trust of those who will



continue building on the achievements in the European arena. This proposal engages the youth, irrespective of their background. It is a measure, which has the capacity of creating awareness and spreading information about the EU. The Commission will be enabled to reach out to every European citizen at a marking point in their life. The project, unlike other initiatives in the past, is not restricted to those who are already aware of the possible advantages of the EU. This proposal alone is not enough to fill the gap between the youth and the EU. Rather, it is assumed that the youth can engage and partake in the EU decision making through personal experiences. A positive perception of the EU agenda will be fostered through experiencing the EU first hand. The birthday card serves as a first trigger for the young electorate to get involved in the European elections. This policy proposal supports a long-term vision: branding, informing, providing with hands-on experiences and ultimately building trust.

