

SHAPING YOUNG EUROPEANS. AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE ERASMUS+: YOUTH IN ACTION PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

My thesis investigates the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program as the main field of construction of a supranational European identity for young people in the European Union. Through the lenses of nationalism studies and ethnography, I look at how the imagination of such a supranational community trickles down from above, and observe how the understanding of belonging to a European community is retained from below. For the top-down perspective, I consider the critical discourse analysis of the official communications by the European Commission and one semi-structured interview with an expert in the implementation of the Program. In particular, my research highlights the official aims and background strategies to instill the sense of belonging to a European community through the focus on employability, civic participation and international mobility. For the bottom-up perspective, I assume an insider ethnographic position following the local and international network of two Italian NGOs involved in the Program. I analyze the results of three group discussions conducted with beneficiaries of the Program and examine the importance of non-formal education and interculturality in their European identification. The combination of such different perspectives finally permits the account of this supranational identity in the making through a process simultaneously conceived and analyzed from above and from below, encompassing both symbolic and instrumental conceptualizations.

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List of Abbreviations

EACEA = Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency

EC= European Commission

ESC = European Solidarity Corps

EU = European Union

EVS = European Voluntary Service

SALTO-Youth = Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for Youth

TC = Training Course

YE = Youth Exchange

Introduction

This thesis explores the case of the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program as the main socio-cultural component of a supranational project for young people in the European Union. Erasmus+ is an EU program resulting from the merging of seven prior programs to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe. Its “Youth” chapter, named Erasmus+: Youth Action Program (from now on: Program) funds intercultural exchanges, training courses and volunteering projects based on non-formal learning and active participation of young people (14 to 30 years old). The aim of my thesis is to analyze the means of the Program to create an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) in a globalized European space connoted by transnational mobility.

The main theories of nationalism studies related with the formation of the European Union refer to both the spillover agenda of the EU institutions, trickling down the effects of the common market economy into a socio-cultural uniformity, and the classic creation of a common symbolism with its own “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm 1983). By applying this double framework to the European Union, I will test these assumptions on the educational and youth mobility projects of the Program, in order to explore its supranational project from above (the official point of view) and from a below perspective (of beneficiaries: participants and youth workers).

I consider the Program as a laboratory that fosters the implementation of a transnational European community for young people (whereas the preferred target group is constituted by less privileged participants), connoted by intercultural diversity and social inclusion. At the same time, Erasmus+ is regarded as an alternative model to the national school systems, building on non-formal education methods and its public recognition, rather than on fixed ministerial-like programs. I observe this laboratory following the perspective of insider ethnography, thus concentrating on the thick description of the social dynamics displayed in this field.

Furthermore, in the specific context considered, I argue that the development of a particular European identity in terms of cultural and political belonging (within the realm of Western democracy) is also contemplated as a process opposing the emergence of neo-nationalist movements. On the other hand, I will show how the Program reflects the importance of a common and cohesive European labor market and democracy. Indeed, the Program focus on employability and the implementation of non-formal education projects. These are usually oriented towards interculturality and the improvement of soft skills for self-development and active participation in the society through different types of experiences offered to young people.

My thesis aims to look at how the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program shapes the socio-cultural identity of young people in the context of a supranational European community, while still being interpreted and implemented through national and class segmentations. It investigates the keystones of the Program from two parallel perspectives. One is the official, top-down one; the other is how the Program is effectively carried out, mediated and perceived by the network of its active users from below. It explores how a language of commodification has been used together with a quantitative emphasis on numbers of young people to mobilize in order to react to the uprising of neo-nationalist movements that constitute a centrifugal force against the European Union, and to instill a centripetal European interest based on the discovery of different cultures and the possibility of free movement with non-formal education projects sponsored by the European Commission.

I will also look into the hybridity of the roles and identities of participants and youth workers in the Program. These beneficiaries represent a focal point of mediation and deployment of meanings and resources in receiving and performing the goals of the Program. Finally, I will explore what kind of conflicts and fragmentations come into play when the perception of the European community conveyed by the Program trickles down from the official aims to a national context of implementation.

In the first part of the thesis, I introduce the theoretical framework and a review of the existing literature on European identity, culture, citizenship and mobility.

In the second chapter, I proceed to present the historical background and studies that refer to the specific context of analysis of European exchange programs for young people, before defining the research scope and methodology proposed for this research.

Thirdly, I look at different sources corresponding to the vision of the Program, and therefore to the imagination of the European community for young people, from above and from below. Concerning the top-down perspective, I analyze official texts from the European Commission (EC) related to the vision and the goals of the Program since its establishment: Communications from the EC and the Erasmus+ Guide (2018). Moreover, one interview with an official involved in the planning and implementation of the Program's activities with a focus on France and Southern Mediterranean countries will be examined in order to complement the official presentation with background information. For what concerns the bottom-up perspective, I have conducted three group discussions with eleven participants and youth workers in the Program altogether from Milan and Genoa, Italy. The discussions will be analyzed in order to understand the reception of the Program by those who are directly involved in it; and to investigate the discrepancies that appear between the official guidelines and the actual implementation. The focus on the Southern European and particularly Italian context, rather than constituting a bias in the observation of a European dimension, will instead serve as a particular point of view where certain dynamics become relevant for a general interpretation. By being the nation with the highest number of Erasmus+ projects implemented, and also central in the key objectives of the Program such as unemployment, poor formal education system and migration, Italy catalyzes the most relevant aspects of the investigation.

Ultimately, I will discuss the findings of my research, building on the field of nationalism studies and the anthropological exploration of the Program. Several categories emerge as elements of discussion, connecting the pillars of the Program to the main theoretical components. A multi-faceted structure of analysis will include the topics of non-formal education, employability, interculturality and social inclusion as core elements that reflect the theoretical discussion over a European identity, thus contributing to develop the analysis of a supranational European community in the making.

Chapter 1 - Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

European Identity

This study contributes to the debate on identity definition in the supranational case of the European Union. The concept of identity, rather than being taken for granted or used as a stable definition, will be regarded critically to challenge the assumptions on the creation of a collective and transnational belonging. Following the indications of Brubaker & Cooper (2007), Sophie Duchesne (2008) accounts that the concept of collective identity was developed by anthropologists and social psychologists to study issues of gender, race and class. In line with the work of Gillespie and Laffan (2006), the author places European identity back in the Westphalian concept of territorial integration and the modern nation-building process of post-industrialization. Hence, different European individual categories do not form any kind of social groups that could be compared to gender, race or class, but they are rather the product of historical and political construction over conflictual borders. Therefore, Duchesne prefers the definition of “identification with Europe” (2008:403) as a narrower concept that does not need social units and is accountable both for the individual and the group feeling of belonging. At the same time, European identity as a category of practice, which the author defines as a “heuristic concept of European identity” (2008:41), is a developing process universally acknowledged. This is also exemplified by a research from CNRS and Centre for Political Research at Sciences Po indicating that “The so called ‘Moreno’ question – ‘Do you in the near future see yourself as (nationality) only, (nationality) and European, European and (nationality) or European only?’ – has become a standard question in Eurobarometer surveys since 1992. It replaced an earlier question where being European was proposed as a possible complement to national identity” (2008:399). Moreover, by using this definition, it is possible to avoid the contradictory debate between federalism and post- or supra-nationalism over the definition of identity.

Building on Duchesne's perspective, I would argue that the formulation of "identification with Europe" is more appropriate for speaking of European identity in the framework of the Erasmus+ Program. Moreover, within this context European identity is something that needs to be continuously performed during the various stages of the Erasmus+ projects, from preparation to implementation (and at different stages within implementation) and evaluation. In this respect, it is different than the static and well-bound vision of the Commission, for which:

Freedom, democracy, equality, respect for the rule of law, human rights and dignity are the fundamental values on which the European Union is based. They form part of our European identity. Education, culture and sport have a pivotal role in promoting active citizenship and common values amongst the youngest generations. Their combination in concrete projects in local communities contributes to the strengthening of the sense of European identity (European Commission 2017:5).

In general, Lisanne Wilken (2015) distinguishes between three main anthropological approaches to the study of European identity construction. The first two, "from above", are represented by considering it either as a process of engineering through cultural policies, or by focusing on its framing among the EU officials through the ethnography of institutions. The third approach, "from below", considers instead the European space as a new frame for identity construction locally and across Europe, utilized by autochthonous minorities who profited from European integration to reframe their own identities as well as neo-nationalist parties who oppose the vision of the Brussels élite, however referring to a Christian civilizational commonality between the European countries.

In the discussion of the construction "from above", Cris Shore is probably the most prolific and reliable author in the field of anthropology and nationalism. In his essay "Inventing Homo Europeus", he theorized that during the 1990s the European Union created a "embryonic state without a nation" (2001:57), through a neo-functionalist spillover approach according to which a shared sense of belonging would have been constructed after the common market economy. In the same period, following from Maastricht (1993) and the Amsterdam Treaty (1999), most of the foundational values were put in place by the European institutions to forge a "People's Europe".

Towards the 2000s instead, the configuration of the European integration process is described as a transnational space of networks which expands into the realm of the national. In this case, EU officials are described as colonial agents, who are “*in Brussels, but not of it*” (Shore 2006:715). Similarly, Renita Thedvall argues that these “EU’s nomads” (2007) have to represent simultaneously national and European interests, causing a blurring of political boundaries in a sort of post-national space. Along this line, it is also interesting to highlight the debate concerning the European symbols and the European “Others” discussed by Wilken (2015:130-1). The author cites Johan Fornäs’ work on the euro currency (2009) as an example of “unwaved flags” (Billig 1995) that create a common everyday narrative. Together with the flag, the anthem, the European Capital of Culture, etc. these tools are simultaneously symbolic and instrumental.

On the other hand, the considerations about the othering are equally important for the definition of the European in-group. The divide between Eastern and Western Europe (Shore and Black 1994; Shore 2006) has been decreasing after the Eastern Enlargement Strategy of the EU towards the post-Soviet space, while a major division between North and South has spread after the 2008 economic crisis. Neo-nationalistic stances have moved towards most of the European countries, organizing competing visions but often referring to the belonging of the same European Christian family (Wilken 2015:138). Rogers Brubaker (2017) proposes the definition of “civilizationism” for the recent identitarian Christian discourse opposed to strong anti-Muslim rhetoric, as a new trend that has been increasing in Europe and North America. The exclusion of Morocco and Turkey from the accession to EU also seems to symbolize the othering towards Islam. This discourse is also connected with the redefinition of a European cultural understanding, which can be explored from the below perspective through the practical understanding of the European features for the Erasmus+ projects participants.

The main literature therefore considers different angles of investigation of the European identity: the symbolic and the instrumental one, its conceptualization from above and, in fewer cases, its interpretation from below. All these angles will be taken in consideration in my analysis, which

especially reinforces the bottom-up focus from the particular viewpoint of beneficiaries of the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program.

European Culture

Similarly to identity, the notion of culture should not be observed from an essentialist perspective, but rather approached with a multiform and dynamic vision. Ralph Grillo (2003) reflects on the essentialist understanding of “culture” in the everyday language and the public characterization of “anxiety about our culture” especially in contemporary Europe. However, the author identifies a third existing way related with the debate about European culture in the European Commission and the Council of Europe, where it is rather linked to a socio-historical and political-legal understanding. Culture will then be considered here as a process in constant evolution, with a particular regard for the symbolic aspects fostered by the communitarian institutions.

This research also relies on the findings of previous anthropology of policy and ethnography of institutions. Irène Bellier and Thomas Wilson (2000) explore the EU as political project and object, especially looking at the microcosms of European institutions and problematizing the notions of European identity and culture in order to analyze them without reifying them. Shore (2000) focuses on the usage of the concept of culture by European policy-makers, in order to create a sense of European identity to advance integration and governance in the transnational space of the EU. Marc Abèles states that if there is a European culture, it must be found within the “practitioners of Europe” (2009). In the results of his ethnographic observations at the European Parliament and Commission in the beginning of the 1990s, he discusses the consequences of pluralism and multilingualism found in the institutions’ everyday lives. According to Abèles, there is a tension between the single culture of European practitioners (“new cultural actors”, generally called with the pejorative term “Eurocrats”) and the supra-national unity that the European community aims at fostering. The “practitioners of Europe”, quite distantly from the rest of EU citizens, have produced their own single

culture through a common space of mediation, which is constantly renegotiated within the European community. The latter, far from being an established entity anchored in past traditions, is instead a “projected entity” (2009:32), based on a post-nationalist understanding of plurilinguism and multiculturalism. The choice of the word “community”, according to Abèles, is itself intended to signify more than a common European market and legal framework, recalled by the denomination “Union”. EU officials therefore incorporate the true essence of the European civic engagement, which is symbolized by EU citizenship. Cris Shore and Annabel Black account how the idea of “selling the Community” (in the words of one of their informants from the European Commission) of a “People’s Europe” (1994: 285) became central since the mid 1970s. The crossing of intra-EU frontiers in particular came along with the creation of a “common cultural heritage” (1994: 294) resulting from different cultural initiatives.

After 1985 especially, “emphasis was placed on the cultural and symbolic dimensions of citizenship, including education, training and ‘consciousness-raising’ campaigns involving the creation of a new repertoire of self-consciously constructed ‘Euro-symbols’” (1994: 286). In this sense, the non-formal education projects of Erasmus+ may then try to make up for the lack of EU institutions comparable to national schools and media in forging a sense of shared belonging especially among the young generations. The first wave of Erasmus students in 1987 anticipated the establishment of the European passport, which was an outcome of the reports of the special committee chaired by Pietro Adonnino in 1984, together with a standardized European driving license, anthem and flag.

However, from a bottom-up perspective, Will Kymlicka (2003) states that as long as citizens accept the three criteria of multinational state (belongs equally to all citizens; repudiates nation-building policies that assimilates or excludes members of minority groups; acknowledges the historic injustice done to minority groups), they do not need to turn multicultural themselves. For example, concerning the first criterion, accepting that the state should belong equally to all citizens does not imply that those citizens should equally try to integrate and learn about all the cultures and the

minority customs within the state. In those successful cases of multicultural states, the citizens adopt a “cosmopolitan interculturalism” (2003:159): they represent themselves as citizens of the world with international tastes in food, popular culture, travel, etc., rather than adopting a form of “local interculturalism” (2003:161), which would imply an everyday interaction with neighbors from different backgrounds. Along with this first contradiction, Kymlicka identifies two more tensions in the paradigm: those of “interculturalism versus isolationism” (2003:161), where the latter is practiced by conservative religious groups at the opposite pole of citizens genuinely curious about other cultures, and “interculturalism versus tokenism” (2003:163), which represents a superficial knowledge of other cultures fostered by intercultural programs that promote a rather essentialist understanding of culture.

The investigation along these lines can provide a useful framework to explore an evolving European culture in the context of the Erasmus+ Program, which already merges interculturalism, education and international mobility for young people.

European Citizenship and Mobility

Confusion might arise in distinguishing the notions of nationality and citizenship when proposing a new definition of European citizenship. Catherine Neveu (2000) advocates for emancipating from the model of national citizenship as a reference when discussing European citizenship, although one should also be careful in separating completely a new or post-national access to citizenship from the national public sphere, as the latter comprehends cultural-symbolic elements of common culture, language and ethnicity. Indeed, citizenship also entails a performative dimension that can be enacted through policies and programs (Bellier and Wilson 2000). In this respect, “citizenship is rather a practice and a process than a stable shape. It is always ‘in the making’” (Balibar 2004; Neveu & Filippova 2012: 181).

According to Rainer Bauböck, Europe represents the only case of supranational citizenship: a “vertically-nested structure of membership” (2007: 454), that works in a constellation of polities at the local, national and supranational level. In this scenario, Christian Joppke has described the evolution of citizenship along the dimensions of status, rights and identity. The element of political participation has been left out because nowadays what we see is the evolution towards a “citizenship-light”: easy to access, quite depoliticized and a bearer of numerous rights but few obligations (Joppke 2010). Joppke’s analysis concentrates especially on Europe after the Eastern Enlargement strategy (2004-07), highlighting the centrality of the freedom of movement after the Maastricht Treaty:

(Art 8a): Every citizen of the Union shall have *the right to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States*, subject to the limitations and conditions laid down in this Treaty and by the measures adopted to give it effect – Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty, 1993), emphasis added.

For Joppke the critical conceptualization of EU citizenship as “market citizenship” is no longer valid: between 1998 and 2004, the European Court of Justice took out the economic factor from free movement and social rights, making it “socially consequential” (2010: 164-66). He concludes that with the introduction of EU citizenship, Europe is shifting from the criterion of nationality to the instrumental usage of residence permits, similarly to the U.S.’s developing importance of the green card. On the other side, the emphasis on the symbolic and identitarian aspect of citizenship is highlighted by the same European institutions:

(The EU citizenship is) both a source of legitimation of the process of European integration, by reinforcing the participation of citizenship, and a fundamental factor in *the creation among citizens of a sense of belonging of the European Union and of having a genuine European identity* –The Commission on Citizenship of the Union (2001), emphasis added.

Gilbert Weiss and Ruth Wodak (2000) undertake an ethnographic and linguistic analysis of the discourses and decision-making processes of the EU on employment and unemployment, focusing on the globalization discourse that often comes into play. According to the authors, the globalization rhetoric acts by emphasizing economic arguments at the cost of social ones and invokes the crossing of the left and right divide to reach the definition of flexible citizens under the universal horizon of a

common depoliticized market, and the related discursive construction based on economic fear. The authors read the distinction of the EU from other global players in economic terms and account for the internal socio-economic differentiation caused by the priorities of competition and flexibility that sustain the framework of the supranational European creation, concluding that the social demands in this new political union are marginalized by the economic necessities.

From a similar perspective, Nora Siklodi (2015) connects the introduction of European citizenship with the processes of differentiation (between and among EU citizens) and exclusion (of “others”, non-EU citizens) through the progression of globalization. The author proposes to redefine the dichotomy of passive/active citizens into a stayers/mobiles dichotomy of citizens in the EU, relying on the *Bourdieuian* notion of “cultural capital”. She analyzes empirical data from focus groups of visiting EU (“mobiles”) and home students (“stayers”) in Sweden across three different axes: identity, rights and participation; exploring the students’ perception of EU citizenship. In her findings, she outlines a positive meaning of EU citizenship in construction, and identified the “stayers” as an outgroup versus their own international community, while home students showed a limited impact on their engagement with the non-Swedish. Concerning EU rights, students identified the “elitist” character of mobility, which is then reserved for a minority of the EU population. The analysis of the focus groups also found differences between the EU-15 and CEE, but the interviewees anticipated that these will phase out in the future. Concerning EU participation, there were differences in the means of political participation (protesting and volunteering were preferred by “mobile” students versus local elections for the “stayers”), while voting in the EU elections was not taken so seriously; contradicting the positive value approach to identity. The article concludes by saying that the dichotomy of mobile/stayers should be further explored (starting from the cultural capital) especially to investigate the presumed cosmopolitan outlook informed by globalization in Europe.

Ultimately, I will argue in the following pages, in this model lies the major component of the identification with a European community imagined through mobility and interculturality. Rather than defending supra-national interests in its rhetoric, the European project offers lifelong learning

and mobility opportunities. The research would thus contribute to the field of nationalism studies by analyzing how the unique construction of European supranational belonging is carried out through the Erasmus+ Program.

Chapter 2 - Research Scope and Methodology

Context of Analysis

Besides the theoretical framework, the historical context and more specific information on Erasmus+ and previous studies related to the international mobility of young people will be outlined in order to complete the general framework in which the analysis is incorporated.

With the Treaty of Rome (1957), the six founding members of the European Coal and Steel Community (France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg) granted to their working citizens the possibility to move and reside freely, thus establishing the European Economic Community. Borders became even more fluid with the Schengen Agreement (1985) and the Maastricht Treaty (1992). Since then, member states have made “efforts to encourage educational exchanges and to ease the portability of educational qualifications” (Olsen & McCormick 2017:271). In other words, programs such as Erasmus and Erasmus+ have been put into place to try and pass on this newly found EU culture in a top-down process from the practitioners to regular EU citizens. The analysis of the macro level will therefore follow this perspective to understand how the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program intends to plan the mobility of future European workers through a discourse on social inclusion, cohesion and intercultural education.

With a budget of 14.7 billion euros, the current Erasmus+ Program (2014-2020) aims to “provide opportunities for over 4 million people to study, train, gain work experience and volunteer abroad” (European Commission 2018), enhancing a “sense of belonging to a community” (European Commission, Erasmus+ Guide 2018). The constantly increasing budget for socio-cultural programs signifies the growing attention of the European Commission to the symbolic sense of belonging of citizens to the European Union. Celebrating its thirty years of existence in 2017, the Erasmus+ Program has involved around 9 million people in higher education study exchanges (4,400,000 students), youth exchanges (1,400,000 participants), vocational training learners (1,300,000),

education staff and youth workers (1,800,000), European volunteers (100,000) and Erasmus Mundus students and staff (100,000). In particular, the higher education exchange students rose every year from a total of 3,000 students in 1987/88 to 347,100 students in 2017/18 (European Commission 2017). Although the share of native-born population living abroad in another EU Member State is on average less than 4% (Eurostat 2011), the EU Commission's efforts indicate that the instrumental value of European citizenship is becoming increasingly entrenched with its symbolic capacity of representing the collective right to move and reside freely.

Furthermore, besides participants, the Erasmus+ Youth Program also involves youth workers in the development and implementation of the projects. I rely on the definition of youth workers provided by the SALTO-Youth Training and Cooperation Resource Centre:

Youth workers work with young people in a wide variety of non-formal and informal learning contexts, typically focusing on their young charges' personal and social development through one-on-one relationships and group-based activities. While acting as trainers/facilitators may be their main task, it is just as likely for youth workers to take a socio- educational or social work-based approach. In many cases, these roles and functions overlap - SALTO 2014:7.

The projects funded by the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program are implemented at a local level with international participants and non-formal education techniques to create intercultural and equal settings. Youth workers active in the Erasmus+ Youth program also mirror and replicate the same transnational community of the projects' participants, to the extent that they represent the highest personification of "mobile citizens" in the European Union. Most of the time they have been involved in international projects based on formal or non-formal education themselves, acquiring a cosmopolitan lifestyle and advocating for open borders and intercultural opportunities. Their own training is based on participation in international seminars organized by other NGOs or Erasmus+ National Agencies. Considering their particular role, in between being participants and in direct contact with the officials, youth workers can thus be analyzed as part of a network in which they act and are positioned.

Largely, Erasmus+ Youth projects provide only partial funds for the salary of youth workers who coordinate and carry out the projects. Therefore, youth organizations and NGOs need to look for co-funding strategies for their salaries and projects' implementation. Moreover, youth workers are an interesting case of encounter between European mobility and youth precariousness. They experience a model of flexibility and a new type of transnational commuting that is not ascribable to linear migration from state to state, nor diasporic community formation; it is rather a circular migration where the boundary between choice and obligation becomes rather indistinct (Raffini 2014). Raffini shows the correlation between mobility and economic differences between Northern Europe and the European South. The latter's data from 2014 show the extent to which the economic crisis has impacted unemployment rates in Italy (46%), Spain and Greece (55%), while the average salaries are lower than the symbolic 1000€ envisaged before 2008 (2014: 150). Furthermore, since the Maastricht Treaty, the "Erasmus generation" coincides with the "new class of precariat" (Standing 2011), resulting in the fact that emigration from Spain and Italy has almost doubled from 2009 to 2013 (Raffini 2014: 153). The tendency has been described as "brain circulation" (2014: 156), differing from the "brain drain" because of its horizontal and transitory connotation. This labor model envisaged by the European integration is therefore also considered as the main background against which my observation takes place and the dynamics discussed are inserted into.

While several studies focus on the impact of the narrower Erasmus (university exchange) program on participants, surprisingly no author focuses on the lines of Erasmus+ Youth's funding (which encompasses the university Erasmus and several other types of intercultural exchanges, internships and volunteering projects). Olsen and McCormick emphasize the role of such programs in shaping the "Erasmus generation", composed by young people with a stronger sense of common identity based on support for "democracy, environmental concerns, and the use of more soft power than hard power in foreign policy" (2017:272).

In addition, Kristine Mitchell (2012) indicates that the Lisbon Strategy (2000) has included the objective that all Europeans should speak two languages in addition to their native language. In

her research, based on a survey of more than 2000 respondents from 25 EU countries, Mitchell highlights that the highest degree of social interaction during Erasmus sojourns is concentrated among international students, rather than between foreign students with locals. The author concludes that this mechanism of cross-border interaction can foster the formation of a transnational identity; however, the limited reach of the programs so far and the possible biases in the selection of already European-minded participants might have reduced its impact. A further indication of the construction of an international community provided by the Erasmus Program comes from the analysis of the long-lasting transnational network of friendships built by Erasmus students during their study sojourns (De Federico 2008). On the other hand, quite interestingly, the empirical findings of a natural experiment conducted with 571 American students abroad do not prove the hypotheses whether cross-border contacts promotes a sense of shared international community (Jones 2014).

The context of analysis is therefore varied. Previous studies tackled specific aspects of transnational mobility and phenomena with either macro-historical or socio-psychological perspectives. My contribution aims instead to look at a particular point of view of a Program that has not been explored at all in the existing literature with an ethnographic approach. Finally, the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program lies at the intersection between many relevant topics for the investigation of the European supranational construction.

Methodology and Data Collection

In the context of my research, I focus on the “Youth” chapter of the Program (also: “Erasmus+: Youth in Action”). The other sections included in the Erasmus+ Program are “Education and Training”, “Jean Monnet Activities” and “Sport”. The “Youth” chapter is specifically aimed at international mobility and non-formal education projects for young people, thus representing an exciting European counterpart of the national school education systems, at the bases of national civic education.

Within the Youth actions, the projects here considered refer to the ‘Key Action 1’, and particularly to the items “Mobility project for young people and youth workers” (European Commission, Erasmus+ Guide 2018, 75), which fall into two different types:

- Youth Exchanges and Youth Workers activities:
- Erasmus+ Volunteering activities.

“Youth Exchanges” are rather short-term projects, subdivided into:

- Youth Exchange (YE): which allows groups of young people (minimum 16 and maximum 60), aged 13 to 30 (plus facilitators with no age limit), from at least two different countries to meet and live together for a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 21 days;
- Advance Planning Visit (APV): preparatory visit (maximum 2 days) involving 1 or maximum 2 participants (group leader + participant).

“Youth Workers activities” comprehend different types of mobilities for youth workers involved in the Program (up to 50 participants), for a duration of minimum 2 days to maximum 2 months (excluding travel time). It is important to note here that the definition of ‘worker’ is not strictly stated. To participate as a youth worker, it is commonly necessary to simply have an association of reference, in regard of which one can be formally a worker, a volunteer, an associate or just a supporter. Youth workers activities can follow into several actions: training courses (TCs), seminars, contact-making events, partnership-building activities, study visits, job shadowing periods, etc. All these activities are arranged by the organizations participating in the project. It is necessary to have participants who are residents in the country hosting the activities.

The guiding principle is constituted by the non-formal education methodology, in order to enhance the involvement of young people and connect them through peer to peer exchanges. The focus on inclusion is particularly stressed by the preference for participants with ‘fewer opportunities’ (which can be of many different types: social, physical, psychological, cultural, economic, geographic, educational, etc.). The projects follow thematic issues in order to explore certain topics (i.e. healthy lifestyle, intercultural dialogue, social entrepreneurship, inclusion and active citizenship,

etc.) as a base for discussing in a context of diversity. Usually two (or more) facilitators guide the activities following a rather structured program. Facilitators can be youth workers from the organizations participating in the project (usually the hosting one), or externals too.

“Erasmus+ Volunteering activities” refer to full-time volunteering activities for people aged 17 to 30 years old to be deployed in another country within or outside the European Union. In the context of Erasmus+ Youth, they correspond to the “European Voluntary Service” (EVS) projects. However, the new platform of “European Solidarity Corps” has been set up to include and expand EVS projects, collecting all volunteering or solidarity activities in challenging situations under one single database where participants need to register themselves. They are divided into:

- Individual volunteering activities: short-term (specifically for people with fewer opportunities): from 2 weeks up to 2 months; and long-term: from 2 months up to 12 months. It is possible to take part only once in this type of project (with the only exception of attending first a short-term and subsequently a long-term EVS for a total of maximum 12 months), while there is no limit in terms of times of participation in Youth Exchanges and Youth Workers activities. EVS also entails an on-arrival training for services lasting 2 months and longer, and a mid-term evaluation for services lasting more than 6 months.
- Group volunteering activities: carried out by groups of at least 10 young people and a maximum of 40, for a period between 2 weeks and 2 months. These are usually referred to as “Large-scale EVS projects”, mobilizing groups of volunteers for specific topics or events (i.e. a festival, an earthquake reconstruction camp).

In both cases, complementary activities to strengthen the impact of the project (i.e. a conference, a local event) can be included as well. Volunteering projects function through the cooperation between a volunteer, a sending organization (from the country where the volunteer is resident, no matter the citizenship), a hosting organization (where the volunteer will work and be assigned to a local mentor and coordinator) and a coordinating organization (which applies for the project’s grant, and it usually coincides with the hosting organization).

I will consider two perspectives of analysis to investigate the aims and the features of the Program. In particular, through the lens of nationalism studies, I will look at how the imagination of such a supranational community trickles down from the top to the bottom. Simultaneously, I wish to investigate how different meanings of ‘being European’ are shaped and retained, both instrumentally and symbolically, from a bottom-up perspective through the implementation of the Erasmus+ Youth Program.

For the first part, I will consider the critical discourse analysis of the official material from the European Commission (particularly the dedicated EACEA – Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency) and its National Agencies. The Erasmus+ Guide (2018) will be regarded as main source of information for the analysis, together with official Communications from the EC concerning the most recent development of the Program. In particular, the launch of the new European Solidarity Corps initiative, gathering all European volunteering and community-work projects within one webpage under one portal, will be regarded as a complementary source. I track the official language and strategies to instill the sense of belonging to a community from the perspective of their promoters, in order to delineate the vision of the European project from above. Moreover, I complement the official presentation of the Program with the background information provided by the analysis of one interview conducted via skype with a representative (Italian, based in France) of one important Agency responsible for the Euro-Mediterranean Youth cooperation for the Erasmus+ Program. The representative has also been chosen among my personal contacts, particularly for her involvement in youth work both at national and international level, and her active contribution in designing, evaluating and communicating with beneficiaries in the Southern European and Mediterranean regions.

For the second part, I concentrate my analysis to the Italian context, where I have been myself involved as participant and youth worker in Erasmus+ Youth projects for about four years, contributing to the participation, coordination and implementation of more than thirty short and long-term projects in four different continents. Therefore, I adopt the perspective of insider ethnography

(which will be further discussed in section “Methodological Notes” of Chapter 4), emerged especially with the Chicago School of sociologists and the ethnography of contemporary societies (O’Reilly 2009, 3). Described among others by Lawrence Hennigh (1981), this perspective allows the ethnographer to use her or himself as key informant. Combined with the multi-sited ethnography proposed by George Marcus (1995), which I have already applied elsewhere (Pozzoni 2018), I therefore profit from a privileged point of view to explore transnational processes which occurred over different times and spaces. Besides, I conducted three group discussions with former participants and youth workers from RIVE (Rete Italiana Volontariato Europeo), a network of active organizations in the European Voluntary Service program. I focus on the leading member of the network, Associazione di promozione sociale Joint (based in Milan) and its twin P.E.Co. - Progetti Europei di Cooperazione (based in Genoa). The eleven respondents, all Italians, were questioned in three small groups concerning the personal stories of their participation to the Program, the extent of the impact on their personal development in relation with their national and European identity, the hybridity of their roles, the values and goals of the Program, the meanings of the projects undertaken or proposed through non-formal education experiences, the communication with the ‘upper’ officials, and the issues faced when connecting local projects with their international dimension based on European mobility.

The Italian context is perhaps the most relevant in this field, as Italy registered the highest number of volunteers sent through the European Voluntary Service Program in 2016 (European Youth Forum 2017). The research therefore contributes to shed some light on a European Program which has never been approached from an anthropological perspective, observing the dynamics and the contradictions in the development of a European identity in the making which aims to contrast neo-nationalist stances across the EU. The focus on the Italian context, and more generally on the Southern European one, is a privileged point of view to observe some of the most relevant dynamics that will be discussed in the next two chapters (e.g., unemployment, non-formal education). The time limitations of my fieldwork did not allow for a broader multi-sited ethnography in other countries.

However, I profited from my personal involvement to complement the information with data derived from other transnational situations (e.g. the intercultural evening, that will be discussed in the section “Interculturality” of Chapter 4) that refer more specifically to the European character of the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program.

Table of Informants

Expert – Skype	<i>age</i>	<i>gender</i>	<i>role</i>	<i>date</i>
Personal Conversation	/	female	Senior Project Manager, Trainer, Assessor of Youth Policy Projects, French Ministry of Youth and Sport	2/5/2018
Group 1 - Milan	<i>age</i>	<i>gender</i>	<i>role</i>	<i>date</i>
F1.1	27	female	Ex-worker and participant (EVS, YEs, TCs)	18/4/2018
F2.1	29	female	Ex-participant (EVS, 1 YE)	18/4/2018
F3.1	30	female	Ex-worker and participant (YEs, TC, Leonardo da Vinci Program)	18/4/2018
Group 2 - Milan	<i>age</i>	<i>gender</i>	<i>role</i>	<i>date</i>
F1.2	27	female	Youth worker and participant (Youth exchanges and training courses)	19/4/2018
F2.2	28	female	Youth worker and participant (Coordination of EVS hosting)	19/4/2018
M1.2	34	male	Youth worker (President, trainer)	19/4/2018
M2.2	35	male	Youth worker (Coordination and implementation of youth exchanges and EVS)	19/4/2018
M3.2	38	male	Youth worker (Vice-president and founder)	19/4/2018
Group 3 - Genoa	<i>age</i>	<i>gender</i>	<i>role</i>	<i>date</i>
F1.3	31	female	Youth worker (General Coordinator, EVS)	24/4/2018
F2.3	32	female	Youth worker (Coordination and implementation of youth exchanges and trainings)	24/4/2018
F3.3	48	female	Consultant and facilitator (Yes and TCs)	24/4/2018

Chapter 3 - European Construction through the Erasmus+ Program from Above

Methodological Notes

This section analyzes official documents and communications related to the Erasmus+ Youth Program complemented with background information provided through one skype interview with an expert in the field. The investigation of these texts aims at framing and dissecting the official perspective on the Erasmus+ Youth Program. This perspective is directly linked with the representation of a common European agenda, and also contains specific directives and directions that shed some light in understanding how this supranational sense of belonging is shaped from above.

In this context, the discourse-historical analysis (Reisigl & Wodak 2005) aims at tracking the language in policy papers and official documents that imply and foster the construction of super-ordinate categories of speech such as ‘Europe’ and the ‘EU’ (Carta & Wodak 2015). This methodology allows for a qualitative analysis of the discourses, as means of evocating and thus creating a reality with a certain narration, since the Program was established. Moreover, the critical approach supports the deconstruction of power relations by showing the inner contradictions within discourses and between discourses and empirical data.

The main document taken into account to explore the features of such a construction through the Erasmus+ Program is the Program Guide (2018). The Erasmus+ Program Guide is meant to be a tool for anyone who would like to look for information about the Program and its rules of implementation (participants, organizations, trainers, young and adults, etc.) and therefore it reflects the official statement of the European Commission. The Program Guide is divided into three parts: the first one in particular states the objectives, priorities and main features of the Program; the second one contains the Actions supported and the third part gives financial and administrative details on the

grant application and selection of the projects. The Guide is linked to several policy initiatives, represented in the Communications from the European Commission, which ultimately signal the political vision of the future of the European Union. The other documents analyzed are therefore constituted by all the official Communications directly related with the establishment and the development of the Program. The interviewee has been involved in the activities of one of the main Agencies for the Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation since 2003 and has worked in its team since 2008. The Agency closely cooperates with the French National Agency for the Erasmus+ Program, where it has its legal base in Paris, and provides for the training and monitoring of the Erasmus+ projects involving partner countries from the Southern Mediterranean Region.

Analysis: Employability & Commodification

The Communication from the European Commission of 29 June 2011 entitled “A Budget for Europe 2020” established a single program in the field of education, training, youth and sport, relying on the previous ‘Youth in Action’ Program for the Youth chapter. Part A of the Erasmus+ Program Guide explains the outcome of the initiative, indicating the priorities and the goals of the Program:

Erasmus+ is the EU Program in the fields of education, training, youth and sport for the period 2014-2020. Education, training, youth and sport can make a major contribution to help tackle socio-economic changes, the key challenges that Europe will be facing until the end of the decade and to support the implementation of the European policy agenda for growth, jobs, equity and social inclusion.

Fighting high levels of unemployment - particularly among young people - is one of the most urgent tasks for European governments. Too many young people leave school prematurely running a high risk of being unemployed and socially marginalized. The same risk threatens many adults with low skills. Technologies are changing the way in which society operates, and there is a need to ensure the best use is made of them. EU businesses need to become more competitive through talent and innovation. – Erasmus+ Program Guide 2018, 5

The main keywords presented are thus related to the socio-economic situation and set ‘unemployment’ as the main issue to be tackled according to the 2014-2020 agenda of the Program. In particular, unemployment is introduced as the main enemy that a united Europe will have to fight to ensure its future survival. This is conveyed by several linguistic devices. The use of the metaphor

of “challenges” (instead, for example, of ‘problems’ or ‘difficulties’) shifts the meaning to a context of positive competition with a sportive connotation, which is later reinforced by the adjective “competitive”. The hardness of the situation is then highlighted by the use of *topoi* of threat: school dropout is presented as a “high risk” that “threatens” social unity through socio-economic marginalization of young people and the same goes for “low skills” of adults in terms of modern technological abilities.

In opposition to this threat, “Europe” is presented as a cohesive unity that will reverse the situation, linguistically relating to the *topos* of savior and ‘victim-perpetrator reversal’. The “European” character is underscored several times (“European policy agenda”, “European governments”, “EU business”) in order to represent and foster an imagined and consistent community.

Finally, the discourse entails a temporal dynamic with a rather apocalyptic tone, often linked to socio-economic dangers (“the key challenges that Europe will be facing until the end of the decade”; “urgent tasks”, “prematurely running a high risk of being unemployed”), contrasting in a binary opposition with the possibility of a prosperous future. Interestingly, a similar reflection has been proposed by Mark Abèles in his fieldworks at the European Parliament (1992) and Commission (1993). According to the author, EU officials “act more in the name of a projected identity than as representatives of an actual entity” (2009, 32), whereas a temporality of future, in constant evolution, represents the horizon that shapes the collective Europe-in-the-making. This reflection also constitutes a particularity of the EU for the field of nationalism studies, where the rhetoric of national representation is usually anchored to the traditions of the past, either real or “invented” (Hobsbawm 1983). Moreover, the future temporality is here linked to the realm of technological advancement and business model of “talent and innovation” for “growth, jobs, equity and social inclusion”. The validity of this reflection over twenty-five years after Abèles’ fieldworks could also make us speak of a precise rhetorical strategy of a ‘community imagined in the future’, rather than a transition phase after the early establishment of the EU institutions still looking for their foundational values.

Following these quotes, it is not by chance that the Communication from the Commission from December 2016, launching “ErasmusPro” (a policy initiative “increasing long-term mobility abroad, for Vocational Education and Training learners, including apprentices or recent graduates”, Erasmus+ Guide 2018, 49), is entitled “*Investing in Europe’s Youth*” (emphasis added). The Communication calls for “an urgent need to invest in Europe's youth” (2016, 2), improving basic skills of young people for the priority of fighting youth unemployment, in a context where:

[M]any young people do not look with confidence at their future. 57% of the young generation feel that young people are excluded from economic, social and democratic life. At the same time young people are eager to engage and participate in society. The situation and prospects of young people are not compatible with Europe's social market economy and the Commission's priority to boost jobs, growth and investment. – European Commission 7 December 2016, 3.

The definition of Europe in socio-economic terms and the priority of fighting youth unemployment is also stressed by two quotes from President Jean-Claude Juncker reported at the beginning of the Communication, where the European Union is depicted as a parenting and inclusive consortium, almost transcending nation-states:

A 29th state is currently emerging within the borders of the European Union. It is the state where people without jobs live. A state in which young people became unemployed; a state in which we see people excluded, set back and left by the wayside. I would like this 29th Member State to become a normal Member State again. – Jean-Claude Juncker, *Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session*, 15 July 2014 (in European Commission 7 December 2016, 2)

As much as we invest in improving conditions abroad, we also need to invest in responding to humanitarian crises back home. And, more than anything, we need to invest in our young people. I cannot and will not accept that Europe is and remains the continent of youth unemployment. I cannot and will not accept that the millennials, Generation Y, might be the first generation in 70 years to be poorer than their parents. Of course, this is mainly a task of national governments. But the European Union can support their efforts. – Jean-Claude Juncker, *State of the Union Address*, 14 September 2016 (in European Commission 7 December 2016, 2)

According to my interviewee, the emphasis of the Program on entrepreneurship and developing competences to access the labor market is especially connected with the 2008 economic crisis, while today the topic of social inclusion is re-emerging as the central impetus, even though still with a look to employability. Furthermore, this seems to be not simply the direction taken by the

Commission, but also based on the results of feedbacks and consultations from participants and organizations implementing the Program. This logic proceeds even further than the possibilities offered by the Program and appears to be overarching with regard to the second set of main goals, those related with interculturality and civic education.

Civic Participation and Extra-EU Borders

Indeed, the following paragraphs of the Program Guide insist on the role of Erasmus+ in shaping the civic participation of young generations to foster a “sense of belonging to a community” that is based on values of inclusion and diversity:

Europe needs more cohesive and inclusive societies which allow citizens to play an active role in democratic life. Education, training, youth work and sport are key to promote common European values, foster social integration, enhance intercultural understanding and a sense of belonging to a community, and to prevent violent radicalization. Erasmus+ is an effective instrument to promote the inclusion of people with disadvantaged backgrounds, including newly arrived migrants. – Erasmus+ Program Guide 2018, 5

In this sense, non-defined “common European values” are supported by socially inclusive initiatives grounded on education, training and youth work. Intercultural understanding and active participation are therefore presented as the other pillars proposed by the Program; offering a “democratic” stand against “radicalization” and against exclusion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds. All these components seem to indicate the theorization of a ‘civic supranationalism’ from the European Commission, where the participation to European society is based on active citizenship and the voluntary choice as a “daily plebiscite” to use Renan’s metaphor (1882). However, Brubaker warns against the normative and analytic division between a good (civic) and bad (ethnic) types of nationalism. This “Manichean” view can be dismantled critically when considering the ambivalence of both conceptions of ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’. If interpreted narrowly, ‘ethnicity’ only refers to common descent, leaving all the cultural aspects to the civic sphere; if interpreted broadly, ‘ethnic’ can rather indicate ‘ethnocultural’ nationalism, thus investing the civic components (Brubaker 1999).

Indeed, this ambiguity is reflected in the context of the European supranational sense of belonging propelled by the Erasmus+ Program on several levels. It appears even more clearly in its contrasts. For example, as my interviewee also mentioned, ‘radicalization’ is a topic on which several National Agencies have worked a lot, but it is a complex issue, looked at with interest but also suspicion. For example, as she stated: “when you work on prevention of radicalization it becomes a hot topic”, that cannot simply fit into the ‘civic’ or ‘ethnic’ categories. “It is interesting, but from a political point of view in France municipalities have the mandate for police prevention too” (Personal Conversation, 2/5/2018).

The same goes for the topic of migration: the annual priorities of the Erasmus+ Program, addressing a specific topic of interest towards which the projects’ applications are welcome to be directed, has been dedicated to either migrants or refugees in various National Agencies of the Program in the last few years. In the current transition phase to the European Solidarity Corps platform, the proposal for the renewal of the Program, whose voting has been postponed to the 30th of May 2018 (Personal Conversation, 2/5/2018), currently excludes the extra-EU Regions (‘Partner Countries’ of the Erasmus+ Program) from the legal framework of the new plan. In practice, countries from North-Africa and the Middle East, Caucasus, Balkans and Eastern Europe, which are currently able to be involved as partners in European Voluntary Service projects but cannot directly receive funds, will be entirely pushed out of the scheme of participation. According to my interviewee, there is a very curious situation in which Finland and Norway are currently advocating for the participation of these Regions in the new scheme, while countries that should be much more involved (such as Italy, France in the Southern-Mediterranean region for example) tend to follow their national political agendas (Personal Conversation, 2/5/2018). The conflictual relation between Europeanization and a backlash of re-nationalization is thus reproduced in this field.

Along this line, it is also interesting to hear that, according to the interviewee, national priorities and political interests are clearly taking over what should be the idea of a ‘European’ Program in the daily activities of the National Agencies for Erasmus+. In other words, there is a

paradoxical implementation of the Program which reflects the findings of Shore and Abèles on the complex internal functioning of the European institutions, especially slowed down by the need for official translations of every document. On one side, the standardized international format demonstrates limitations of both cultural and practical comprehension when, for example, a Moroccan partner organization is asked to provide bank details according to the French system. On the other side, the safeguard of French language is an emerging priority that clashes with the implementation of international youth projects (Personal Conversation, 2/5/2018). The topic of the language in particular seems to be central in the development of a common English-speaking Europe through the Erasmus+ Program. It is thus indicative that even in this subject, within a Program that promotes international mobility by definition, we experience a return to the use of national languages and the narrowing of borders of participation.

Interculturality, Non-Formal Education and Multiculturalism

The fear for the emergence of neo-nationalist movements across all Europe (and especially coming from Eastern Europe, see Wodak & Boukala 2015; Brubaker 2017; Mikenberg 2017) seems to suggest a backlash of the idea of the Eastern Enlargement strategy and a reformulation from above of a smaller but more cohesive and ambitious EU (POLITICO 2018). This process is reflected in the new developments of the Erasmus+ Program, concerning the establishment of the platform of the European Solidarity Corps. The latter has been introduced in the Communication “Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture”, which mentions the rise of neo-nationalist forces and the dangers of globalized information technology, calling for the discussion on “the future role of education and culture in strengthening the sense of belonging together and being part of a cultural community” (2017, 2):

The reflection about the future of our Union also entails a reflection on the strength of our common identity. When our European values and democracies are tested by awakening populist forces at home and abroad or by the spreading of "fake news" and the manipulation of our information networks, it is the moment when European Leaders and the EU

institutions must react. They decided in Rome in March 2017 to keep the EU as a unique project where, following the motto of "unity in diversity", the EU and its Member States have been able to draw on the unique strengths and richness of their nations to achieve unprecedented progress. Sixty years after the signing of the Treaties of Rome, strengthening our European identity remains essential and education and culture are the best vectors to ensure this. – European Commission, 14 November 2017, 2.

In this regards, the foundational values that are put in place as positive features of the European constitution are those celebrating the experience of European identity in all its diversity. In the words of my interviewee, the added value of the Erasmus+ Program is the opportunity of experiencing “real intercultural processes”, opening their minds to different cultural perspectives and to the understanding of a wider perspective:

If well implemented, these international activities allow for young participants and youth workers to open new scenarios that destabilize them, and this is really important, but also open scenarios that they could not have otherwise. For example, I am really attached to European Voluntary Service projects and longer experiences. This does not mean that volunteers become professionals in what they are doing, but in many cases they come back with a different motivation. They put themselves in a different perspective, they see the world differently. And what you achieve is more responsible citizens. When we speak about neo-nationalisms, I think there is a very low awareness on what is European identity in practice, meaning the real encounter with people – Personal Conversation, 2/5/2018

This definition well resonates with Kymlicka's aforementioned discussion on multiculturalism and interculturalism, including its contradictions (especially ‘local interculturalism versus cosmopolitan interculturalism’ and ‘interculturalism versus tokenism’). In fact, the architecture of the Program aims at offering a lifestyle of cosmopolitan interculturalism within a multicultural system to its beneficiaries: that is, EU participants have the possibility to picture themselves as citizens of the world, travelling freely from one country to another and meeting people from different cultural backgrounds. In long-term projects, such as the European Voluntary Service, the interaction on a local level in the context of volunteering service is also enhanced, even though class fragmentations may appear. On the other side, in short term projects such as youth exchanges and training courses, the vision of the different cultures intermingling is often reduced to stereotypical vignettes. These latter aspects will be discussed further in the implementation of the Program from below. From the top-down perspective, it is interesting to mention the emphasis on the connection

between local interculturalism and international mobility. For example, my interviewee mentioned the project “Europe Goes Local. Supporting Youth Work at Municipal Level”¹, a network of National Agencies for the Erasmus+ Program coordinated by the Austrian National Agency.

The tension between local and global informs the Program and the development of this European multicultural ethos in several ways. The possibility for local impact is directly proportioned to the length of the project: during long-term projects such as European Voluntary Service, few volunteers work and live in close contacts with locals, while belonging to a private international context at the same time (i.e. they share the same apartment, they speak in English to the coordinator of the volunteering activities, etc.). To the contrary, short-term projects such as youth exchanges and training courses bring together wide international groups in local places, usually isolated from big communities, and usually plan to have a local impact through a final event of the project open to the public. In the latter case the presence of non-formal education, which is another pillar of the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program, is much more enhanced, as participants and youth workers experience non-formal education activities for several hours every day. According to the Program Guide, non-formal education is strictly connected with active (European) citizenship and the participation in democratic life, as well as the purpose to develop soft skills:

Another challenge relates to the development of social capital among young people, the empowerment of young people and their ability to participate actively in society, in line with the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty to "encourage the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe". 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. Moreover, there is a need to provide youth organizations and youth workers with training and cooperation opportunities, to develop their professionalism and the European dimension of youth work. – Erasmus+ Program Guide 2018, 5v

In my interviewee’s opinion, non-formal education is a value-related process that becomes methodological, and in order to do so it is necessary to have well-trained youth workers, not only able to perform activities but also to set learning goals and reflect on their pedagogical objectives. In the interviewee’s words, this meta-reflection is very important and there is the urge to formulate clear

¹ Accessed May 16, 2018: <https://www.europegoeslocal.eu/>

objectives that could be implemented at national level first and then turned into the international one. The official approach to this issue is represented by the introduction of a European Training Strategy in the Field of Youth to support the development of quality youth work in Europe². However, the interviewee noted an overall discouragement from the resurgence of neo-nationalist movements after twenty years of implementation and, as already mentioned, from the tendency of using European Programs for national purposes in contrast with the European enthusiasm of the 1980s (Personal Conversation, 2/5/2018). This inclination could reverse the spillover agenda before mentioned (Shore & Black 1994; Shore 2001) in the theorization of the European supranationalism in the 1970s and 1980s: in the current transition “from market to polis” (Shaw 2007), the expansion of a common European market does not seem to have the same results on the social level of shared sense of belonging.

Nonetheless, the Commission seems to be in the process of continuing its efforts with the current changes that are discussed for the renewal of the Program, following the Gothenburg Social Summit of 17 November 2017³. Indeed the “EU Budget for the Future”, presented on the 2nd of May 2018 in the Communication “A Modern Budget for a Union that Protects, Empowers and Defends. The Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027”, proposes a stronger focus on youth. According to its synthetic factsheet: “This will be achieved by doubling the size of Erasmus+ to €30 billion and the European Solidarity Corps to €1,26 billion budgets to give opportunities to more young people to study, train and volunteer abroad, and by earmarking funding for addressing youth unemployment within the European Social Fund” (European Commission, 2 May 2018, 2).

The introduction of the European Solidarity Corps platform has been anticipated since 2016 and according to my interviewee is especially related to the vision of the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, who addressed it in the aforementioned State of the Union Address

² Accessed May 16, 2018: <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/training-and-cooperation/trainingstrategy/>

³ Accessed May 16, 2018: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/publications/eu-leaders-meeting-education-culture_en

on 14 September 2014. Once again, the value of “human” and “professional” experiences are inevitably entrenched in the description of the goals of the framework. The keyword “solidarity” is stressed as the main force that can call to mobilization of young Europeans, connecting social to professional opportunities:

There are many young, socially minded people in Europe willing to make a meaningful contribution to society and help show solidarity. We can create opportunities for them to do so [...] Solidarity is the glue that keeps our Union together [...] Young people across the European Union will be able to volunteer their help where it is needed most, to respond to crisis situations [...] These young people will be able to develop their skills and get not only work but also invaluable human experience. – Jean-Claude Juncker, *State of the Union Address*, 14 September 2016 (in European Commission 7 December 2016, 2, par. I)

The reference to the personal pronoun “we” indicates specifically the vision from above by the Commission, which President Juncker puts in the condition of enabling young people to “show solidarity” and develop themselves. The metaphor of solidarity as a “glue” finally refers to strong and irreversible advancements in the constitution of “our Union together”.

This evocative image is reprised in the beginning of the Communication “A European Solidarity Corps” of 7 December 2016, which also sets the goal of 100,000 young Europeans enrolling into the European Solidarity Corps by 2020. In particular, the metaphors of “fabric” and “dream” define the idealistic character of the EU project, which is based on social solidarity and mutual help of its citizens, who share “a community of values”:

The European Union is built on solidarity: solidarity between its citizens, solidarity across borders between its Member States, and solidarity in its action inside and outside the Union. Solidarity is a shared value which is strongly felt throughout European society. It defines the European project which should be time and again restated and reinforced. It is part of the core fabric that makes the European dream inspire generation after generation. The European Union is about more than common rules, institutions or markets: it is a community of values.

More solidarity will keep Europe together. It provides the necessary unity to cope with current and future crises by holding a strong moral ground. It provides a clear compass to guide the European youth in their aspirations of a better Union. It is in their minds and hearts that lie the strength and wit to further advance the European project. And it is the moral duty of current leaders to prepare the ground for it.

[...]

Young Europeans need greater and more easily accessible opportunities to express their solidarity. The European Solidarity Corps will connect enthusiastic and committed young people ready and willing to work on a common solidarity project. It will offer an inspiring and empowering experience for young people who want to help, learn and develop, while

gaining valuable experience. The aim is to see the first 100,000 young Europeans joining the European Solidarity Corps by 2020. – European Commission 7 December 2016, 2

The repetition of the concept of “solidarity” goes further than explaining the purposes of the new Program: it reconfigures the foundation of Europe as a “community of values”, where a strong moral stand is called into the picture to “keep Europe together”. Moreover, the discourse replicates the top-down perspective of the Commission where the presence of young people, who are supposedly representing the subjects of this new action, is almost commodified. In both Juncker speech and the Communication, this is achieved through a logical syllogism where the Commission acts as an agent, while young people are rather described as tokens:

x: European Union is built on solidarity

y: Young people in Europe are inspired by that solidarity and want to express it in return

z: The Commission provides the opportunity for young people to fulfill this interest.

Moreover, ‘y’ is reinforced by a *topos* of authority (*argumentum ad verecundiam*), confirmed by the following statistical data:

Willingness to volunteer outstrips the opportunities on offer. Only 6% of young people say that they have stayed abroad for the purpose of volunteering and of those who say that they have not done so, 88% say that they did not have the opportunity. In general, more than four in ten young Europeans say that they would like to work, study or train in another EU country⁴.

An ongoing study⁵ shows that solidarity-related sectors in the EU employed over 40 million people in 2015. By way of example, the estimated labor force in the area of social integration and social work, including the reception and integration of asylum seekers and migrants, currently stands at 170,000. The estimated labor force is greater in sectors such as education and health care. By way of indication about the potential interest, data from the EURES portal⁶ shows that around 80,000 jobseekers are looking for work abroad in solidarity-related sectors.

[...]

Surveys show that the participation in voluntary activities of young people from all socio-demographic groups could be improved. Young people who finished their education at the age of 20 or over are more likely to have participated in organized voluntary activities (26%) than those who ended education at the age of 16-19 (20%) or 15 or under (15%). In

⁴ Eurobarometer of the European Parliament "European Youth in 2014" (EP EB395)

⁵ Forthcoming report on "Labour demand in solidarity-related sectors in the EU".

⁶ Assessment based on state of play at one moment in November this year. The portal collects job vacancies and allows individuals to search for a job and create their CV online in order to be found by employers registered on the portal. Education, work experience and desired occupation can be indicated in the CV template.

2014, only slightly over a quarter of young people taking part in organized volunteering received some kind of formal recognition (e.g. a certificate or diploma). – European Commission 7 December 2016, 3

This rhetoric therefore allows for introducing the European Solidarity Corps initiative as a solution to a certain need created from above to structure a more cohesive European society.

Recognition and Solidarity

The topic of recognition, mentioned in the last part of the previous extract, is also identified by my interviewee as one of the central issues in the promotion of the Program and it is linked with the difficulty to pass the opportunities and the objectives in a top-down communication. According to the interviewee, the European Training Strategy is going in the direction of setting quality standards in order not to be exclusive, but to be more inclusive after the Program increases its recognition, which is not very significant at the moment (Personal Conversation, 2/5/2018). On the other hand, the introduction of the ESC platform goes to the detriment of better evaluated programs such as the EVS, which was evaluated as one of the most successful experience of Erasmus+ (Personal Conversation, 2/5/2018; Erasmus+ Evaluations 2018).

In general, the Mid-term Evaluation of the Erasmus+ Program (2014-2020) indicates that the performance indicators were achieved, with 1.8 million individuals who took part in mobility activities (together with the previous base between 2007 and 2016 the total amounts at 4.3 million young people and more than 880 000 practitioners) and more than 240 000 organizations involved in cooperation projects, while “the evaluation shows the program has a clear ‘Europeanisation’ effect” (2018, 2), and:

There is also evidence of a contribution to a more cohesive Union. The Erasmus+ program fosters positive social/civic behavior and a sense of feeling ‘European’ (+19% compared to non-participants). It reaches out to disadvantaged young people (11.5% of the total number of participants in Erasmus+) more than its predecessors or comparable national schemes. Yet the evaluation points to the need to do more to reach out to the more vulnerable in society and to facilitate the participation of smaller-size organizations. – European Commission 31 January 1 2018, 2

In this extract, the terminology “positive social/civic behavior” is connected with “sense of feeling European”, thus conveying a direct causality between the two. Once again, statistics are used to reinforce the “evidence” of the Program’s contribution to the European supranational unity, which is more successful in comparison with “national schemes”. The definition of “disadvantaged young people”, usually very large (from economic, to geographic, physical, social and cultural fewer opportunities) and quantifiable with a tick on the projects’ evaluation forms, is not offered here. However, the concept of social inclusion is also suggested to complete the shape of this positive supranational sense of belonging.

Nevertheless, the regulation laying down the legal framework for the introduction of the European Solidarity Corps (30 May 2017) will cancel the denomination ‘European Voluntary Service’, which will be incorporated into the ESC scheme. The ESC online portal will provide a direct matching of volunteers with receiving organizations, thus increasing the possibility in terms of number of projects, but reducing the quality in the face-to-face management of volunteers, especially in the preparation phase before their entry in service. However, the regulation confirms the intent of promoting “European values”, which are described especially in terms of “international attitude” and development of languages and competences:

With regard to the volunteering dimension, the European Solidarity Corps will build on the successful model of the European Voluntary Service which has provided a tangible contribution to the development of competences, language learning, fostering of international attitudes and promotion of European values among young people over the last twenty years. – European Commission 30 May 2017, 40

The recent focus on “solidarity” also comes from the will to put the new scheme in contact with the EU Aid Volunteers Program, started in 2018 as part of the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations⁷, oriented towards development cooperation and crisis response volunteering projects. The flourishing of new actions going in this direction is currently generating difficulties of communication in the high spheres too. According to my interviewee, there is slightly

⁷ Accessed May 16, 2018: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/humanitarian-aid/eu-aid-volunteers_en

less concertation between the European Commission and the National Agencies nowadays compared to few years ago (Personal Conversation, 2/5/2018). The exclusion of the extra-European Regions from the ESC budget, for instance, contains a clear political vision from the Commission rather than facilitating the effectiveness of the operations of the Agencies. While ESC and EU Aid are very different projects from EVS, according to my interviewee the message passing from above is that ‘it’s the same thing’⁸, but when it has to be communicated to beneficiaries everything becomes much more complex. An example from the interview is the regular training session of explanation that the interviewee gives to representatives of organizations. The difficulty of transmitting clear and inspiring information to beneficiaries on how to apply for funds, use the budget, etc. reflects a general incommunicability of the Program, which tries to be simplified from above but encounters paradoxes of political nature in the field (Personal Conversation, 2/5/2018). As I will show, this has a strong reflection in the implementation of the Program from below too, and it is ultimately connected with the absence of clarity concerning the definition of a univocal European sense of belonging.

Summary of Findings

The analysis of the Program Guide and related policy documents, complemented by one expert interview, has investigated the framework in which the supranational European feeling has been planned from above. The Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program is inserted in this framework in order to mobilize young people and instruct them with European values and non-formal education methodology. However, a series of ambivalences seem to be reflected in the formulation of these values, which contain both an instrumental and a symbolic meaning at the same time.

⁸ I have heard myself a similar formulation from the director of the Italian National Agency in the public speech for the commemoration of the 20 years of the EVS Program. Besides, a petition to “Save the EVS” (<https://savetheevs.eu/>) has been launched by the RIVE network in response to the open consultation of the European Commission about the proposal for regulation of the ESC framework. The possibility to cancel the role of the “sending organizations” in the new ESC platform, which would mean a lack of quality in the learning processes of volunteers and participants involved in the projects, has provoked many reactions that slowed down the final decision of the Commission, which is still in progress.

The discourse-historical analysis has shown how the rhetoric on employability has merged with a language of commodification of international experiences within the preparation, implementation and future planning of the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program. This “investment” in Europe’s youth aims at promoting positive values of intercultural understanding and active citizens’ participation for a more cohesive European Union. On the other side, the development of rather impersonalized platforms, such the European Solidarity Corps, and the inputs of re-nationalization of the Program according to the national contexts seem to highlight a backlash in the cosmopolitan and multicultural vision of the Program.

The decreasing enthusiasm for the EU project, opposed by the rise of neo-nationalist and populist movements all across Europe, have caused a more restrictive focus resulting in a rhetoric of ‘solidarity’ and social inclusion, while laying down the bases for the development of soft skills and marketable competences within the EU countries space only. Finally, the perspective of anthropology of policy allows for the exploration of the inner conflicts and the paradoxical cleavages between the official presentation of the Program and its actual interpretation. The next chapter will concentrate on the perspective of those who participate and organize Erasmus+ projects, thus showing different facets and discrepancies from this official viewpoint.

Chapter 4 - European Construction through the Erasmus+ Program from Below

Methodological Notes

This section aims at exploring the bottom-up perspective on the European construction through the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program. The Program is considered as a privileged field of observation, in which values and practices framed by the European Commission are interpreted by the beneficiaries. Many of the issues discussed in the planning and description of the Program's objectives and means from above are indeed reflected in its implementation from below by youth workers and participants. In order to explore the practical implementation of the Program in relation with its supranational European purposes, I have conducted three group discussions with beneficiaries in Milan and Genoa. I have contacted the discussants among my circle of friends and ex-colleagues. After taking part in a European Voluntary Service project myself in 2013-2014, I have worked in the coordination and implementation of Erasmus+ projects in Milan (from 2014 to 2016) and Genoa (from 2016 to 2017). Therefore, I complement the analysis of findings with my own background knowledge. This insider perspective of ethnography has several risks, including the difficulty to detach from the own knowledge and the possibility that informants tend to think that they are not interesting enough to be an object of interest themselves. On the other side, insiders are facilitated in a faster comprehension of the local reality and to create more rapport with engaged participants (O'Reilly 2012, 3-6). Finally, I have tried to reduce the bias by setting formal and recorded group discussions, while rather profiting from my own experience in this field to quickly catch connections and dynamics that could have been otherwise difficult to understand.

I utilize an inductive bottom-up coding method, deriving the process of analysis from the grounded theory. According to this "theme coding" model (Gordon 2015, 99), I will begin by analyzing raw data from the group discussions and isolate the main topics that can offer different

perspectives from the group discussants. The themes of the coding allow for the exploration of the perception of participants in European projects and other relevant topics that are connected to the Erasmus+ Program. In fact, following the interpretivist approach, I will have the possibility to discuss the meanings as socially constructed elements, (2015, 33) within an environment that can be supported by the knowledge based on self-ethnography.

I aimed at organizing three different groups of four to five participants with a gender balance. Unfortunately, due to some cancelations and the general presence of more females in the organizations examined, I arranged two groups with three (female) participants and one (mixed) group with five. The group discussions lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours in informal environments. All the participants were familiar with the organizations in which they were involved either as beneficiaries or as workers (Associazione di promozione sociale Joint, Milan; and Progetti Europei di Cooperazione, Genoa). The headquarters of the organizations are located in the periphery of Milan and in the historical center of Genoa. They both run in shared spaces with other associations (Genoa) or in social projects from the municipality (Milan). Many structural problems are present in the management of the spaces, which have poor lighting, sometimes slow internet connection, and of the organizations themselves, which receive very limited public co-funding and are dependent on the savings gathered through previous, successful projects.

Initially, I planned to separate the analysis between participants and youth workers. I soon realized that the hybridity of those roles was too embedded to be able to differentiate the questions. The “working” character of the EVS volunteers, and the role of youth workers as “participants” during training courses, for example, indicate that the Program addresses all these beneficiaries with the same objectives. Moreover, all the youth workers have been participants in the first place, thus sharing a common Erasmus+ experience at the beginning of their reflections. In the viewpoint of researching the dynamics of an emerging European supranationalism, it appeared very difficult to separate the different stances and types of beneficiaries in the analysis.

Indeed, this hybridity of the roles was one of the points of debate during the group discussions, and also reflected a more general hybridity in the identities – as national sense of belonging and as attachment to the objectives of Erasmus+ as European Program – of the discussants. In particular, the debate over the terminology of “youth” program emerged in the discussions. Obviously, the “youth” component is very present, also concerning the language used for the denomination of the projects (e.g. *youth* exchanges), and it is usually linked with the characterization of being a European youth. Interestingly, the economic report for youth projects is different than with projects for adults (from other EU Programs). According to one of my discussants (F3.3, 24/4/2018), in projects with adults the stress is on reaching the objectives, while in youth projects it seems to be the simple attendance. Indeed, the Italian National Agency is currently very strict on the dates of traveling of young participants, that cannot differ from the official beginning and end of the project, while in other types of projects participants can travel before or after the project dates. This is a contradiction itself for a Program that encourages to discover intercultural diversity, and moreover it is linked with the broader discourse on employability:

F2.3: [The Program] is based on a transfer of competences from one generation to another one, but this way seems very compartmentalized, why can't you put together a young person with a sixty years old? Maybe it is for organizational purposes, but in my view there are too many rigid categories in this way.

F3.3: Moreover, now that I think about it, projects for adults are always for professional categories, even though unemployed people over 40 have the highest social risk, and they don't have similar opportunities to participate in experiences that could open their minds. Otherwise, the conclusion is that the idea of Europe is built on 20-30 years old youngsters.

F1.3: Yes, and also young people who can profit from all this kind of experiences but then they have no opportunities, because they will not find a place: maybe you participated in a EVS project in a kindergarten and you acquire the competences, but once you don't have a diploma that allows you to work, you go back to your country and you are still unemployed.

In this discussion, building “the idea of Europe” and offer experiences of employability to young people naturally follow each other, in line with the official aims of the Program. However, further contradictions are highlighted. In the continuation of this discussion, “Europe” emerges as something

positive that protects participants and beneficiaries. The Erasmus+ Program has indeed strict guidelines on budget reporting and precise economic benefits for participants, who enjoy free travel and accommodation plus a pocket money in long-term projects such as EVS. At the same time, it seems to be setting higher standards than what participants will find after the end of their experiences. What the Program offers is a wider international mindset and the capacity to “open the mind” of participants towards a European perspective. This aspect has also been stressed in all the conversations:

F1.1: for me the exchanges are more meaningful when you can involve young people who are in a stage of self-development, teenagers or early teens. It's more weighty. I'm now working with teenagers between 13 and 17 years old, I can imagine that it is something that shocks them. It changes their perspective, the way of thinking...because maybe it's the first time they're alone, in a new context...they approach people and experience differently. It's difficult, it's something scary. If I think at the kids I'm working with they all tend to stay in their shell, in their comfort zone. The EU gives this kind of opportunity and transmits positive messages in this sense, but it's not so important that it's the EU, anything like this would be positive.

M2.2: Initially I participated [in Erasmus+ projects] for two reasons: first, I wanted to live in Spain and improve my Spanish. When I was sixteen I spent two weeks in Spain with a Comenius project. In that moment I observed the beauty of knowing another culture, to meet people from another culture, so I looked for any program for the easier way to make an experience abroad. Second, I was always a bad student, so I never had certificates that could state that I was good in something, while in the EVS for example there is no other requirement than motivation to apply and to evaluate your objectives. Then I actually learned much more than what I expected, one important thing that came up later for sure was the fact of being bi/tripolar (laughter): meaning that when you live in another culture then you think in another way, and you see certain things in a different way, simply you can think in more than one way. So talking Spanish and living there and feeling to be a bit Spanish I looked at things in a slightly different way. Not only languages but also way of living.

Thus, the European element in the Program seem not related to the content of the experiences, rather to their promotional aspect conveyed by the Commission. In other words, the branding of these experiences is a very powerful tool, perhaps more than the content of the experiences themselves. The request to make it as visible as possible, especially through the EU flag and the denomination “Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Program of the European Union” that must be attached to every outcome as a dissemination strategy, was also recalled by one discussant in his communication with officials (M3.2, 19/4/2018). As a result, the “mental barriers” that the Program helps to destroy are

directly connected by beneficiaries to the supranational European community, to the point of advocating for the desirability of a more cohesive Union:

M2.2: Initially you don't do that [participate in Erasmus+ projects] to feel yourself more European, but personally after having done some projects, like an EVS, youth exchanges, Leonardo in France, etc. I wrote a small article on the desirability of the "United States of Europe", not much as a European nationalism but for the opportunity to be more free, to travel, to enlarge your frontiers: if before the establishment of the EU your frontiers used to be the borders of Italy, now they are the borders of Europe. Especially after you have experienced the facility to move and get into relationships with others.

F3.3: Between Italian and European I define myself Italian first rather than European, but I have a lighter nationalist dimension, in terms of belonging to a nation, than my other colleagues [from a second job] who cannot experience the dimension of being an international worker, the Program canceled some of my mental barriers.

This also brings interesting results when discussants are questioned on their national identities. Following the discussion of the latter extract, one discussant replied that she actually feels much more Italian in the first place. She stressed how the Program made her realize that in fact the projects should be more focused on the value of every single European culture, in order to better discover the own roots and profit from the positive aspects of the local traditions, from dances to stories (F2.3, 24/4/2018). Another discussant observed that during short-term projects there are countries' representatives who are very proud of their national identity, in contrast with herself and colleagues, for whom "the local identity is a bit canceled". In her view, there should be a landmark in every project by which the "European element should be applied in some way, maybe through symbols or different representations... Actually you create the idea of Europe yourself, we are inventing it" (F3.3, 24/4/2018). The third discussant went on in underscoring that "the idea of a European identity is missing in the end" (F1.3, 24/4/2018), especially due to the lack of a common language and a common positive perception of what comes from the EU. This confusion was even reinforced by an anecdote: before and after the Brexit vote, the discussants implemented two projects with an English organization. The same participant, a nineteen year old boy, participated in both of them, and during the second time one discussant discovered that he voted pro-Brexit (F3.3, 24/4/2018); nonetheless he kept on participating in European projects.

On one side, the awareness of youth workers that the process of “imagination” of the supranational feeling has to be invented is clear; on the other, it seems very difficult to find what are the elements to build on a shared sense of belonging. Moreover, it is surprising that thirty years after the beginning of the Erasmus Program and twenty years of European Voluntary Service, the values are discussed as “still in the making”:

M1.2: A source of motivation that one would think could be there but for example it's lacking in us it's the issue of the European identity, because honestly [...] When I did the Italian civil service, I had to take part in a training where they explained us what is conscientious objection, how the civil service started, what are the values, etc. And this is something missing in the European projects. It lacks a training, some moments in which you can discuss what is the European Commission, what is the European Union, what do European identity and citizenship want to be, what are the pros and cons, etc. And I think it's a missing element especially now, when there is a debate on the sense of all of this.

M2.2: Everybody asks you: did you work on European values? I've never seen a charter of the EU values. I think it is also because the EU is a young formation, so the EU values are still in the making. Aside from the principles that created it, it's an ongoing process.

F1.2: It is also a debate on the 'high' levels, so it's hard for us to follow some guidelines.

While the European values of the Erasmus+ project are hardly distinguishable, the effects that the Program want to convey seem more clear. Connecting the people and socialize them in an intercultural and international dimension responds to the consequence of introducing the EU citizenship and create a civic commitment that reflects the division between “mobiles and stayers” identified by Siklodi in terms of cultural capital (2015). According to one discussant, the main goal is to just put closer young people from countries that are usually not acquainted with each other. In her opinion, the possibility to share an experience, focusing on a specific topic, while living together with people from the same age and different countries is a way to break down the distance, which is described mostly as “a mental block”. For example, to meet an Estonian would not be very common for her in other occasions aside from Erasmus+, in general she is not aware of similar opportunities of sharing the same context and spaces for an intensive period with people of different foreign backgrounds (F3.1, 18/4/2018). For another discussant, what is at stake in Erasmus+ projects is not strictly European values, but rather values that can be shared transversally and that could work for

any person of that age from anywhere in the world. In particular, she mentions youth exchanges and EVS as experiences that are surely linked to the culture and mentality that had ideated the Program, but transmit a universal way of being together with others, share an experience, get involved and test oneself in a new environment (F2.1, 18/4/2018).

Another aspect that came up in all the discussions, which is related to the cancelation of cultural barriers, is the stereotypical view on cultures, indeed similar to the essentialist understanding previously outlined following Ralph Grillo (2003). For example, a typical moment featured in all youth projects is the intercultural evening. The intercultural evenings consist of a presentation by the participants of the countries that they represent. It can be done through videos, dances, music, theatre, flags, clothes and the sharing of so-called traditional food and drinks from the country of origin. There is no official instruction on implementing the intercultural evening, but following the principle of learning by doing every organization passes on the decision to include it in the programs of short-term projects. The possibility to connect one particular aspect or experience of a different culture with a specific person or event, which was already mentioned by the expert in the interview, is also remarked by participants. According to one, participating in exchanges means to become more exposed to diversity and overcome the initial diffidence towards people from foreign backgrounds. Finally, she got to know European through European participants in the exchanges (“more than Europe maybe the other European nations”), and in her words this impacted her identity (F3.1, 18/4/2017). Similarly, another discussant explains that this process is connected with the development of the personal identity: “It is also a way to identify yourself. It’s often stereotypes, linked to food, personalities, etc. But in the end there is always something more behind those, conveyed from the people” (F2.1, 18/4/2018).

This also marks a distinction between short and long-term projects, whereas the latter ones are preferred as educational experiences in one group discussion in particular, because of the possibility to work on the long-term impact on the local community of Genoa. However, from the point of view of the reception of the Program from below, interculturality and the understanding of

different cultures does not appear as one of the main reasons to participate. In the words of one of my discussants:

F1.3: If you think about it, in the youth exchanges the intercultural evening is a stereotypical vignette. It is also true that it is not the main motivation for the youngsters: almost everyone is looking for “an experience”, to acquire working skills, to increase their CV. Then once they are there, especially in longer projects such as EVS, they experience the intercultural shock in the first person, which they usually tend to underestimate before. However, in the short-term projects the intercultural component is much lighter, like “let’s be friends, dance together, etc.”

This aspect becomes salient when there are conflicts inside the groups: on one side, they are solved or prevented thanks to a supranational atmosphere of commonality, on the other, they tend to reproduce the same stereotypes that they want to combat. It is also interesting that short-term projects such as youth exchanges and training courses are usually held in isolated places within a closed and communitarian environment, where the European atmosphere is created:

F3.3: [In the youth exchanges or training courses] you usually stay in an isolated place, in a quasi-communitarian dimension, it is an international experience almost unique with this modality, you feel yourself in a European dimension. It is the dimension that you feel you are living in that moment, because anyway you live together with Finnish, French, Hungarian people...in those moments the youngsters actually feel all the same, there is not much difference, and when you hear their conversations it sounds like: “Oh, so you also do this in your country...?”. In the end you understand that all the world is very similar, there is not much difference. And also the conflicts that there are, quite unlikely they are ethno-religious conflicts, it is more something that you could find at school for example, like: “he did not pass me the ball, he woke me up at night because he was loud, etc.”. The participants realize that they are really similar.

One anecdote is illustrative of the display of ethnic and religious identities inside this specific context.

One discussant recalled how struck she was when Muslim participants happened to practice Ramadan during one youth exchange. As they ate at different times of the day, this represented a practical motive of exclusion because those participants were mostly active during the night. However, they used their own resources to find different ways to integrate in the group, for example cooking for everyone at night, and this gave the opportunity for everyone to experience a difference in a quite pleasant manner, whereas language barrier represented instead a more pragmatic obstacle (F3.3, 24/4/2018). On the other side, according to her colleague who participated in the same discussion, the problem is that this dynamics are misleading for participants on the actual reality of Europe,

especially in the case of participants with migrant background: “Maybe they will agree with these dynamics and believe that Europe is cool, but it is the same Europe that lets people die in the Mediterranean sea” (F1.3, 24/4/2018). In fact, this contradiction was reproduced in another anecdote, when participants visited a market managed by people with refugee status, and one group leader carried her bag in front of her as she was afraid of the possibility to get robbed, even though the whole project was carried out to promote the inclusion of migrants (F3.3, 24/4/2018). The cosmopolitan attitude that the Program conveys thus seems to have some inner contradictions, which are rather solved thanks to the commodification and branding of those experiences.

Social Inclusion

According to the discussants, social inclusion is one of the aspects of the Program which receives the most emphasis. In the perspective of nationalism studies, social inclusion through European sponsored projects also imply a redefinition of the in-group identification from a national to a supranational frame. Indeed, the philosophy of Erasmus+ projects for young people is to provide close and intensive contacts between people from different backgrounds in a peer-to-peer scenario, in order to decrease cultural and linguistic barriers and foster intergroup cooperation.

However, in the definition of this supranational category of in-group identification, geopolitical interests, culture and identity are also tied together creating a confusion because of gaps between the European branding on the Program and its practical implementation. For example, the involvement in the Program of countries which are not in the EU, such as Turkey, Russia and Ukraine, was hard to understand for one discussant: “These countries are different from the European identity, and the youngsters who participate often find themselves confused to do an experience with people who are not from similar countries to the ones inside the EU”. Therefore, she claims that more effort is needed to think of people as individuals and not as countries’ representatives, because the Program did not consider this issue (F2.2, 19/4/2018).

At the same time, class stratifications and cultural capital seem very connected to the reception of information concerning the Program. Indeed, the Program has never been very well known, and the founder of the organization recalled how most of the job at the beginning implied working on the simple promotion of its opportunities (M3.2, 19/4/2018). This is often connected to the fact that the Program covers travel, food and accommodation, which is usually regarded with the fear of being a scam by potential participants, combined with the general confusion about the line of financing of the European Commission (M2.2, 19/4/2018; F2.3 24/4/2018). In order to explain the dynamics to potential participants, it is often necessary to strongly simplify what are the contents of a youth exchange for example: “We tell it like a joke: there are five Italians, five Germans, five French, etc.” (F1.3, 24/4/2018). The necessity to extremely simplify the communication is also connected to the low recognition of non-formal education methods, especially in the Italian context, and the difficulty of explaining it to externals. Non-formal education is described as an innovative concept and methodology, far from the mainstream schemes (M1.2, 19/4/2018). In two cases in the discussions, the example of learning through practice in non-formal settings was described as something that facilitated the process of self-development, e.g. in the case of language learning:

M2.2: Until last year of high school – beginning of university I was convinced of not being able to learn languages (and everybody confirmed me this: friends, professors....), but then when I started approaching Spanish and doing exchanges and knowing other cultures I don't think I am so bad. The same with Portuguese: I can speak and travel and deal with that without having studied it at all. And I think that's important, it's something not valued at school in a formal environment, while it counts a lot in an informal environment.

Non-Formal Education and EU Citizenship

Once more, the methodology conveyed by the Program aims at merging interculturality with employability through non-formal education techniques, based on peer-to-peer exchanges and learning by doing processes. The beneficiaries stressed both the benefits of this method, which allows for an attentive and personalized self-development, often described as more entrepreneurial, and its aspects of innovation, which are not recognized and considered valuable in formal education contexts.

The Youthpass certificate is the main tool for recognition and certification of Erasmus+: Youth in Action projects, established in 2007. It is based on a self-assessment model and comprehends eight key competences⁹. The purposes and the development of the Youthpass certificate is mostly based on the process of reflection on learning and self-evaluation. However, the European flag is present in the header of all the pages of the certificate. The Youthpass is also central in the recognition of these experiences at European level, as it is slowly starting to be accepted as a certification for small traineeships or course credits required by formal education systems.

The possibility of profiting from the European citizenship and travel to other countries, not as simple tourists but “to live with local people from other countries and take part in their vision of the reality” (F1.2, 19/4/2018), is also highly evaluated by the discussants. Indeed, even if the rules of the Program require residency, and not nationality, as a criterion to participate, holding a EU citizenship simplifies and increases the possibilities to profit from the international experience thanks to the freedom of movement and the option to remain and work abroad. According to a discussant, interculturality is what encompasses all the different topics treated by Erasmus+ projects (F1.2, 19/4/2018), while being combined with the freedom of travel. The latter becomes visible especially in the case when there are projects that involve countries neighboring the EU, with participants “who really experience much difficulties in mobility and you note that difference, like they have less chances, less rights, they are penalized” (M2.2, 19/4/2017).

The aspects of innovation and entrepreneurialism are also suggested by the language of commodification of the experiences that is used by the discussants to describe the Erasmus+ projects

⁹ The eight Youthpass competences are the following:

- 1) Communication in the mother tongue
- 2) Communication in foreign languages
- 3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
- 4) Digital competence
- 5) Learning to learn
- 6) Social and civic competences
- 7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship and
- 8) Cultural awareness and expression

Available at: <https://www.youthpass.eu/da/help/for/youth-initiatives/learn/information/> , Accessed on May 22, 2018

outcomes, including terms such as “soft skills”, “impact”, “visibility”, “network”, “indicators”, “labor market-oriented”. The marketable logic is then transmitted and influence the beneficiaries’ expectations, whereas the suggested connection by this kind of vocabulary is the link between self-development and enhancing competences. According to one participant, this relation changed over time, as the emphasis on employability raised with the economic crisis and the high unemployment rate in Southern Europe:

F2.2: What I see is also that the profile of participants changed over time: today it’s more who want to acquire competences rather than making an effort on their self-development (to learn different cultures, the respect of the others, etc.). So people come, take what they want and then they go, there’s no process on themselves...it’s not our or anybody’s fault, but the Program is lacking the work and follow-up on personal process in these projects.

F2.3: On the formal aspects of the Program, the main keyword a part from “social inclusion” is “European citizenship”, the development of this transnational conception.

F3.3: The main push for many youngsters anyway is the idea of making a trip, almost close to a holiday, which is not a nice word in this context, which then turns into something more, this is the “Plus” of the Program, together with the international dimension itself.

F2.3: It is always about making “an experience”: a “unique experience”, a “life experience”.

The accessibility of these experiences do not only come from the possession of EU citizenship, but class cleavages also influence the promotion and availability of Erasmus+ projects to the public. As in the words of one discussant (F2.3, 24/4/2018), for some youngsters that the association closely work with from the periphery of Genoa, in cooperation with another organization that provides support for their integration, taking part in such experiences it is really a life-changing event. However, the majority of participants usually find the opportunities on the internet and without an adequate preparation. Therefore, participants with better social and cultural capital are facilitated in the research, while also being the ones who are already more acquainted with an European environment and less in need of international experiences.

Moreover, the new tool in development with the European Solidarity Corps, in the words of some of my discussants, does not consider at all the problematics of participants with fewer opportunities. Indeed, the initial stage of the portal has already been implemented, and participants are required to register to the ESC database in order to be accepted for the projects. The portal is so

hard to use that is almost inaccessible even for practitioners, and this signals a distance between the official levels and the implementation of the Program from below:

F2.3: From my point of view as youth worker, there is no connection between the higher and the lower level, which often happens in all these kind of programs...but in this case maybe it's really lacking trust from above!

F1.3: What is happening with Erasmus+ is similar to the Justice¹⁰ and the Rights, Equality and Citizenship¹¹ Programs: the European Commission opens calls for the integration of migrants while closing and patrolling the borders at the same time. In Erasmus+, with the creation of the ESC portal instead of the EVS calls, you have a portal that is almost not accessible to participants with fewer opportunities, they could not even find it on the internet. Even for us as workers, I am ashamed of telling the volunteers to go and look for the portal online.

There is a distance between who is contributing to the ideation of these programs and who actually benefit from them; those bureaucrats have no idea of what are the actual difficulties of people with fewer opportunities, not even of everyday participants. When you call them and say "the Turkish group cannot come", for example, they are surprised and ask you why. They don't even imagine that they have visa obstacles most of the time.

Another conversation also stressed the top-down model of communication from the European Commission and National Agency, where beneficiaries are "not really consulted" (M1.2, 19/4/2018). On the other side, the positive character of having a low level of institutionalization and formality in this top-down approach was equally highlighted.

Summary of Findings

The development of young Europeans in the making follows similar criteria than those modelling a market-oriented flexibility between the different countries of the European Union. The group discussions have outlined a general hybridity in the roles of the beneficiaries, who are often practitioners, youth workers and participants at the same time. The strong European branding and promotion of the Program's opportunities point at offering marketable experiences on one side, while instilling an international dimension and aiming at breaking cultural barriers. However, several contradictions emerged in the implementation of this double soul of the Program. The overlapping of

¹⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants1/programmes-2014-2020/justice/index_en.htm , Accessed May 22, 2018

¹¹ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants1/programmes-2014-2020/rec/index_en.htm , Accessed May 22, 2018

national and supranational sense of belonging, caused by a quite superficial and essentialist usage of national cultures, and the innovation allowed by the non-formal education methodology, also have counterparts according to the local contexts and the profile of participants. Class segmentations and the redefinition of (internal and external) European borders through the focus on social inclusion are also components that influence the conceptualization of the Europeans-in-the-making.

The analysis of the group discussions has thus highlighted the practical implications of the European supranational construction through the Erasmus+ Program. The Program aims to connect youth mobility, international experiences, employability and interculturality by the means of a European branding. The bottom-up reception reveals several contradictions in the way this aims are interpreted from below. Moreover, the ethnographic insider perspective on the inquiry has allowed to deconstruct the elements of Europeanization and show their ambivalence at several levels. Eventually, the sense of belonging to a European community is constructed according to its spillover agenda from above, but also presents many side effects that constitute salient disconnections between the official goal and the actual perception of the dynamics enabled by the Program implementation.

Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the construction of European supranationalism through a particular point of view. The ethnographic perspective on the analysis of the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program has allowed the exploration of a European imagined community made of young people and based on international mobility, interculturality and non-formal education methods oriented towards their employability.

In the first part of the research, I have outlined the main theoretical inputs and reviewed the literature that deals critically with the definition of a European identity, culture, citizenship and mobility. Most of this literature examines the development of a trickle-down theory by European bureaucrats from market to civic community, concentrating on the symbols that were established after the middle of 1980s to foster the creation of a cohesive community. Within this literature, the biggest attention has been given to Erasmus university exchanges and the aspects connected with international mobility and European citizenship. On the other hand, my work has aimed at contributing to this field by exploring the dynamics of a program that has not been studied before, the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program.

This contribution is crucial for three reasons: first of all, it is an attempt to rethink the construction of the European identity from several angles, not only the top-down technical perspective, but also the bottom-up one. Second, such an identity differs from the traditional expressions of political subjectivity, such as the ones embodied in nationalism, usually anchored in the past. The European sense of belonging to a supranational entity is instead constantly in the making and projected towards the future. Thirdly, this research shows how the construction of the European identity goes beyond civic commitment, which is usually represented as its essence. Both symbolic and instrumental components integrate the civic dimension, as happens with nationalisms.

What emerges from the literature are either theoretical considerations on the European identity and citizenship, historical aspects of the EU multilingualistic and multicultural system, and statistical data. My aim has been instead to place those considerations in practice and observe the dynamics of a European construction in the particular field of the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program, which represents an important step for the socialization of future EU citizens. Therefore, in the second part, I have approached the analysis of a series of texts, including Communications from the European Commission and the Erasmus+ Program Guide. These were analyzed along with one expert interview and three group discussions with the Program's beneficiaries. I have divided my analysis between the exploration of the Program from above, based on the official point of view of the European Commission and complementary information; and from below, drawing from the group discussions and my own perspective of insider ethnography. The attention on the Southern European context of the primary sources has permitted to explore a privileged *locus* where representative narratives take place.

The observation of both the top-down and bottom-up perspective of the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program has permitted to compare the official aims with the practical results of the projects' implementation. Several findings emerged from this analysis. Some of the pillars of the Program can be identified and put in relation with the main theoretical frameworks proposed: non-formal education and its recognition (connected with the debate on European identity), interculturality (as definition of a European culture), and employability (allowed by the European citizenship and mobility). Moreover, several lines of conflicting interpretation appeared during the thick description of the Erasmus+ Program, while comparing the perspectives from above and from below.

- *Non-formal education and its recognition:*

From the official point of view, non-formal education is a value-charged methodology that aims to promote a civic engagement against the insurgence of radicalization and neo-nationalisms. The mobilization of young people in a context of peer exchange and discovery of diversity encourage the democratic existence of a European political structure. The meta-reflection on the objectives of

the non-formal education methodology is also being encouraged with a strategy from above, while its reception from below is mostly linked with positive connotations, including the possibility to share unique experiences. The labelling of these opportunities as “European” fosters an emotional attachment as well as concrete tools for the innovation of educational strategies and the guidance towards a transnational, flexible labor market. The future recognition of these experiences at a European level might constitute a counterpart to national education systems, which could be interesting to analyze in further researches on education and nationalism as a means to shape the (supra)national identification.

- *Interculturality:*

Similarly, interculturality is promoted as the main component of the European identification, following the EU’s motto “Unity in diversity”. The consequences of setting interculturality as the added value of the Program from the official point of view are connected with the cosmopolitan imagination of the European community, mostly based on flexibility and innovation. Moreover, the directions of the National Agencies influence the goals of the Program according to the context of implementation in terms of re-nationalization of its international purposes. On the other hand, interculturality from below is performed in a very superficial and essentialist way. Cultural exchanges are often reduced to stereotypical vignettes, especially in short-term projects, and mostly they allow to connect personal experiences with intercultural discovery.

- *Employability:*

The official objectives of the Program stress the challenge of youth unemployment as the main enemy of the European Community. From the analysis of the Erasmus+ Guide and Communications from the European Commission clearly emerges the call for cohesion of a supranational Union, based on the transnationality of the labor market and the need to “invest” on youth, while the expert interview has signaled a decrease of this focus – behind the official discourse – after the peak of the economic crisis. On the bottom-up perspective, the discourse on employability includes the facets of entrepreneurship and development of soft skills, which are rather interpreted by the beneficiaries as

tools for self-fulfillment and the possibility to get actively involved in a European dimension. This is also connected with the opportunity to benefit from the freedom of travel and the chance to learn in a non-formal environment.

- *Social inclusion:*

Another pillar of the Program, recognized by both the top-down and the bottom-up viewpoints, is constituted by the topic of social inclusion. Social inclusion is an overarching discourse that can be translated into different applications. The major aim of the Program is to include young discouraged people that face difficulties mostly in terms of economic (in the words of Jean-Claude Juncker, the 29th EU country constituted by a population of unemployed young people) or social marginalization. In terms of a European supranationalism, social inclusion is a concept once more linked with a civic engagement that tries to reduce the distance between EU institutions and everyday citizens; and to prevent radicalization in terms of neo-nationalism and populism. On the contrary, several mechanisms of exclusion are enabled at the same time, and are reflected especially in several sub-dynamics, such as the opposition between short-term versus long-term projects; local versus global dimension; qualitative versus quantitative approach.

- *Impact of the Program:*

The personal impact on participants is multi-faceted and context-dependent. For some beneficiaries, short-term projects, especially on teenagers, can leave a strong impression to open the minds of youngest participants and break cultural barriers. On the other side, the impact on personal development and local communities is high only in long-term projects with a qualitative focus. The direction of the European Commission, based on the analysis of its communication and the new budget presented for the upcoming years, is to increase the numbers of participation through the European Solidarity Corps platform, while reducing the measures of support for disadvantaged beneficiaries. In this sense, long-term projects will be particularly increased in number, to allow for a higher transnational mobility of more independent participants.

- *Branding and promotion:*

The Program communication also exposes the difficulty for participants with fewer opportunities, particularly through its top-down promotion and branding. The difficulty to simplify and communicate clearly the messages and objectives of the Program that comes from above encounters with a stratified accessibility to the Program's opportunities from below. The intersection between class and supra-nationality becomes relevant, since beneficiaries who are socio-culturally better positioned already acquired the *habitus* of a European cosmopolitan socialization and know how to profit from the opportunities offered. Moreover, a supplementary paradox is to be found particularly in the role of the youth workers, who experience the highest level of flexibility and economic insecurities while promoting a Program based on innovation and supposed empowerment of young people in consultation with the EU institutions. This reflects the problematization of a civic definition of the European supranationalism, as a sense of belonging built on the respect of civil rights and active participation.

- *Borders and migration:*

Finally, a strong contradiction is represented by the redefinition of physical borders advanced by the Program, which is now in a transition phase where the cooperation with extra-EU countries is being reduced. The annual priorities of the Program, lately addressing the inclusion of migrants and refugees, open controversies with the actual implementation inside of national frameworks that highly complicates their status of participation. Furthermore, the distance between officials and beneficiaries in understanding this complexity shows an important difference in the interpretation of the Program from above and from below: while the concern from above is mostly focused on intra-EU mobility and reducing unemployment (thus not indicating migrants as preferred members of the imagined European community), participants give an higher value to the breaking of all barriers and cultural distances.

Ultimately, the Erasmus+: Youth in Action Program represents a particular point of observation of dynamics linked with the development of a European supranational feeling. The Program indirectly fosters a dichotomy between "good Europeanized" versus "bad neo-nationalists"

that do not want to surrender to a cosmopolitan progress. In this sense, it reflects the ambivalence highlighted in the literature between the instrumental character of the EU, based on a common market, freedom of mobility and entrepreneurial innovation, and the symbolic aspect of active participation in a diverse community of engaged citizens. Moreover, the Program offers commodifiable experiences and opportunities more than establishing traditions, identifying in young people the core of a projected identity to be developed looking at a transnational system to be consolidated. For this reason, the future developments of the Erasmus+ Program remain a central issue to be investigated by further analysis on the supranationalist construction of the European Union.

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