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Will the new generations of Europeans be up to the task of succession?

The European project has been imagined and shaped by several generations. That of the founding fathers who, around Schuman, Monnet, Adenauer and De Gasperi, decided in the aftermath of a murderous conflict to build a new project for peace and reconciliation. That of Mitterrand and Kohl, whose joined hands at Verdun forever symbolise Franco-German reconciliation. The generation currently in office, born after the Second World War, embodies a need for renewal but is still marked by this memory. The new generation, born after the fall of the Berlin Wall, is quite different: for them, peace was a matter of course, until Russia's invasion of Ukraine brutally marked the return of war to the continent[1].

Therefore, the question deserves to be asked: will today's youth be able to nurture and renew the European project of tomorrow, to give it a new political, economic and cultural direction, not to consider it as something so natural that they will forget to defend it? These young people are alternately criticised for their activism when they march in the streets, for their lack of maturity when they express themselves too loudly, and for their passivity when they do not vote. These young people suffered the full force of the crisis linked to Covid-19 and are constantly being asked to make new sacrifices.

The rising generation is ready to commit itself to the causes it holds dear: the environment, equity, the rule of law. It will also have to be constructive, find the resolve to consolidate the European Union and ensure the future in a changing world. The recovery plan for Europe is called *NextGenerationEU*, and it is first and foremost addressed to the latter.

YOUTH FACING COUNTLESS CHALLENGES

In recent years, the European Union has experienced a succession of financial, economic, migratory and health crises. Still traumatised by the rejection of the draft constitution treaty in 2005, it has been constantly subjected to populist, nationalist and Europhobic pressure and with Brexit it is now aware of its mortality. Designed for long term management, it is constantly obliged to respond in emergencies, when dealing with issues as crucial as security, identity, solidarity and borders[2]. Its field of competence is constantly expanding, but its legitimacy is constantly being questioned.

It is in this minefield that the new generation is growing up, confronted at the same time with the scars of a pandemic that has required an unprecedented effort of solidarity, the risk of economic recession that exposes it more to precariousness and exclusion; and demographic ageing that weakens the European social model which is the continent's pride. In the collective work "*Une jeunesse sacrifiée*[3]", the authors point out that young people have been the most exposed to poverty and unemployment since the crisis of the 1970s; in June 2022, 13.6% of the under-25s were unemployed in the EU, compared with 6% of the total working population. The baby-boomers, who lived through the Thirty Glorious Years and imagined that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the end of history, are leaving their descendants a colossal financial and environmental debt.

Young people oscillate between universalism and identity, abstention and investment in the public space. Far from being homogeneous, it is divided into two large blocks: one part, educated, open to the world,

[1] This text was originally published in the "*Schuman Report on Europe, State of the Union 2022*", editions Marie B, May 2022. It has been updated.

[2] Interview with Luuk van Middelaar, *Robert Schuman Foundation*, November 2021

[3] *Une jeunesse sacrifiée* éditions PUF, Paris, August 2021

takes full advantage of the vast area of free movement provided by the single market and feels essentially naturally European - the other, poorly qualified and not very mobile, suffers an ever-growing feeling of relegation, powerlessness and abandonment.

YOUTH IN THE SPOTLIGHT IN 2022

Strangely, there is no European youth policy as such. In addition to actions in other areas - education, training, social, health, culture, rights and protection - the European Union only has a supporting role based on two articles of the TFEU: Article 165 (development of exchanges, participation in democratic life in Europe) and Article 166 (vocational training). This legal timidity does not prevent various steps forward being taken. The new EU Youth Strategy 2021-2027 intends to encourage youth participation in civic and democratic life, as well as solidarity and intercultural understanding.

Made popular by the film *L'Auberge espagnole*, Erasmus, which became [Erasmus+](#) in 2014, remains one of the most popular European programmes. Its primary purpose is still to facilitate academic mobility within the European Union, but it has now been extended to new areas such as vocational training and apprenticeships or entrepreneurship.

Since its creation in 1987, more than ten million people have benefited from it, and the aim is to double this figure by 2027. The impact in terms of integration, openness to others and a sense of belonging to the EU is real: 90% of Erasmus students have improved their ability to work and collaborate with people from different cultures and feel they have a European identity^[4]. The programme also encourages romantic relationships: a study carried out in 2014 showed that 33% of former Erasmus students had a partner of another nationality (compared to 13% of those who did not go abroad during their course) and that 27% had met their spouse during their stay. This phenomenon is such that the number of "Erasmus babies" is estimated at one million...

Another flagship initiative is the *European Solidarity Corps*, which since 2016 has offered 18-30-year-olds (35 for humanitarian aid) to volunteer or work for a few

months as part of a project organised in their country or abroad (campaign to prevent exclusion, refugee reception, healthcare etc ...).

The *Youth Guarantee*, adopted in April 2013 and consolidated in 2020, provides people with the opportunity of finding a quality job, return to education or further training within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education.

And the COVID19 crisis has marked a new stage. The [NextGenerationEU](#) recovery plan provides for action on education, training and employment. In a highly symbolic gesture, Europe has proposed to declare 2022 the *European Year of Youth*, a way of honouring this generation, which has suffered particularly badly from the pandemic, and to highlight the central role holds in the construction of a better future. Moreover, the Commission has suggested the launch of a new initiative for the most disadvantaged 18-30-year-olds, notably those who are not studying or working. The [ALMA](#) programme (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve) will offer them work experience of between two to six months in another Member State, together with tailor-made support and counselling.

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE LESS INTERESTED IN THE MAJOR COMMON POLICIES

Jacques Delors issued a warning a few weeks after the British referendum on Brexit in June 2016^[5]: "*it is essential to place our planet and its people, rather than stock market values and purely nominal economic growth, at the heart of our vision of Europe. In fact, Europe has progressively moved away from its great founding ideals, which put people at the centre of its project, to embark on a vast movement of liberalisation around its great pillars: competition policy, trade policy, the single market and its four freedoms.*"

But these policies do not seem to rouse much interest amongst the new generations of Europeans, who are more concerned about social justice, and who want to build the future on new foundations. Yes, to mobility, provided it is green and inclusive. Yes, to "free and undistorted" competition, provided that it serves the interests of citizens and not just consumers. Yes, to

^[4] Erasmus+: a turning point in the lives of 5 million European students, May 2019

^[5] Le Monde

globalisation, but to one that is controlled, to fair exchange guaranteeing reciprocity, accompanied by social and environmental clauses[6]. As for the common agricultural policy, which guarantees Europe's food sovereignty, it often rouses little interest among young people who prefer to consider it from an ecological angle.

In an evolving geopolitical situation, the emergence of new threats, and internal developments within the Union, the issues at stake are constantly changing. The meeting of young Europeans in October 2021 (EYE), organised as part of the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#), ending in May 2022 led to the identification of concrete ideas notably the strengthening the common foreign policy, the provision of better support to asylum seekers, the introduction of a single standardised European passport and the facilitation of recycling.

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH NEW PRIORITIES

It is undoubtedly the question of the environment that drives the under 30's the most, from climate marches, activism to individual eco-responsible behaviour; but it is also the one which generates the most concern and pessimism in terms of the future[7]. This young generation will therefore be keen to further develop the policy pursued by the European Union, which is at the forefront in the fight to counter climate change and intends to remain so despite the war in Ukraine: the reduction of greenhouses gases could rise to 57% by 2030 thanks to measures recently adopted as part of the *Green Deal* - to the point that this deal could, according to Laurence Tubiana, economist and diplomat, act as a vector for a "new social contract"[8]. Europe is confirming its added value here, as the continental level is an incomparable guarantee of progress in this area.

Another major concern is the defence of the rule of law and, more broadly, of justice, freedom, equity and solidarity. Here again, the European project represents an essential asset: the Member States are united within a "Union of law" and are bound to respect the legal commitments to which they have subscribed[9]. This is also an argument around which the pro-European opposition can be structured in countries that do not

respect the independence of the judiciary or the media. There is no doubt that this fight will continue. The same will be true for health, education, the reduction of socio-economic inequalities, gender equality, the defence of minority rights and the fight to counter racism. "New protests over racism, the environment or feminism are particularly widespread among young people. This shows a generational awareness that creates a gap in values with the older generations", say Cécile Van de Velde and Sarah Pickard[10].

In terms of start-ups, innovation and new technologies, society is benefiting from opportunities that did not exist twenty or thirty years ago[11]. The digital transition will therefore remain central of expectations and concerns, which will involve resolving the contradictions between major principles - independence, data protection, reduction of CO2 emissions - and dark realities - digital pollution, the power of the sector's giants, threats to privacy and democratic values.

One subject, dear to France, might remain difficult to manage at European level - that of defence, and strategic autonomy, and, more generally, the ability to assert oneself in a multipolar world marked by the rise of China, the repositioning of the United States towards the Pacific and Russia's territorial ambitions. What is at stake for the Union is its ability to decide its own destiny and to learn the lessons for its security and sovereignty from the war in Ukraine.

YOUNG PEOPLE EAGER FOR NEW FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

A dual trend is emerging amongst young people; on the one hand, a distrust of traditional politics, and on the other, "a movement to reappropriate and broaden the very notion of politics"[12]" which is expressed in various ways - voting for anti-system parties, voluntary abstention, militant radicalisation, protest movements, associative commitments. Voting is even turning into a means of motivation in certain circumstances, as shown by the sharp rise in youth participation in the 2019 European elections[13]. "The Erasmus generation has a duty to defend Europe now. It is now time for them to do for Europe what Europe has done for them"; will this

[6] Thomas Dupont-Federici
Pour une nouvelle génération européenne, November 2018

[7] A study to be published in [The Lancet Planetary Health](#) reveals that nearly 60% of 16-25-year-olds suffer from 'eco-anxiety', distress linked to climate and ecological crises.

[8] *Le grand continent*

[9] *Le Monde*

[10] Cécile Van de Velde, professor of sociology at the University of Montreal and Sarah Pickard, lecturer in Contemporary British Civilisation at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, *Libération*

[11] Interview with Gauthier Van Malderen, [Robert Schuman Foundation](#), January 2021

[12] *Le Monde*

[13] *European Parliament*

4

call made in June 2021 by Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas be heard?

For this to happen a new, positive vision of Europe has to be drawn up. A Europe that is capable both of making the most of its immense achievements and of promoting a new form of action, less ideological, rid of its endless divisions between federalists and sovereignists, communitarians and intergovernmentalists. A Europe that would not be afraid of debates, argument and quarrels, that would not be satisfied with a system that, by dint of seeking consensus, becomes aseptic and disembodied. A Europe rich in culture, both diverse and yet a factor of its unity.

It is on this condition that the now nascent European public space that is now emerging as progress is made, as crises occur and as major issues of common concern are addressed, can be fleshed out and could in future be based on new tools: transnational lists for the elections to the Strasbourg Parliament, a strengthened and improved *Spitzenkandidat* process for the choice of the President or President of the Commission, a right to initiative for the European Parliament. The large-scale migration from East to West and, more generally, mobility within the continent are also contributing to the creation of a new mental geography: in 2019, almost 18 million Europeans were living in another Member State - 13 million of whom were of working age (20-64 years) - a large proportion of whom were Romanians, Poles or Bulgarians[14].

By committing themselves, by taking risks, by leaving their comfort zone behind, today's youth, freed from rear-guard battles, can breathe new life into the European project. In "*Letter to the generation that will change*

everything[15]", Raphaël Glucksmann shows how new forms of citizen activism (Instagram and other social networks, influencers, leaflets, groups, mobilisation) have forced politicians to take up the Uighur tragedy and some brands to rethink their production model. However, it is important not to stop there. "*All citizen engagement remains incomplete and fragile if it does not translate into legislative progress*", warns the MEP, who invites young people to vote, to elect, to be elected. In short, to invest in politics, including European politics, to shake up an ageing continent.

For its presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first semester of 2022, France chose to act according to three key words: belonging, revival, power. This triptych could also serve as a guideline for the future, both to find the reasons and means to live together and to strengthen European sovereignty. This will require the forging of a common narrative and to find leaders to embody it. As Robert Schuman said in the 1950s: "*Europe needs a soul, an ideal and a political will to serve this ideal*". The new generation of Europeans undoubtedly has a great soul. It has an ideal, that of moving towards a fairer and more environmentally friendly society. It will also have to show courage, audacity and political will to put this ideal at the service of the collective without falling into the trap of individualism and withdrawal. And to succeed in this improbable challenge: to return to the sources of the European project, humanist, universalist, pacifist, while giving it a new face and a truly ability to act in an unstable, divided world.

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[14] 2020 Report by the Commission on worker mobility

[15] Lettre à la génération qui va tout changer Editions Allary, Paris, August 2021