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# Revisiting the Erasmus+ Communication Strategy

An analysis of the role of Erasmus+  
in tackling political disaffection  
among the European youth

Estudiante: **Marta Molina Urosa**

Dirección: Roberto Rodríguez Andrés

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## 1. Introduction

The speed of societal change is understood to be the main motivation for public institutions to reorganise and find ways to reach their objectives and serve the citizens under their jurisdiction better (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 4). Living in the era of networked, empowered publics and real-time media, the public sector should be constantly updating and monitoring changing demands to respond to the emerging needs of the citizenship (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 50). When novelty emerges, it creates a need to resolve the conflict between already existing knowledge or expectations of the citizens and their current experience of their reality (Velasquez & Rojas, 2017, p. 4). Failure to address these changing demands and communicate the actions the public institution is taking to fulfil those needs could make an organisation fragile in the public eye. Not providing the desired services to citizens is often associated by taxpayers with concepts such as “incompetence” or “lack of efficiency” in public institutions. This could lead to losses of legitimacy and lack of trust in the organisation (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 50). Therefore, strategic communication is considered a fundamental resource that should be called upon to go one step further and to be able to anticipate events and prevent citizens' expectations from being dashed in the future.

In the past few years, the European Union has faced multiple allegations relating to democratic deficits in the institutions which have precisely led to losses of legitimacy and distrust of the EU's decision-making processes. According to Robert Rohrschneider, “the EU's representation deficit undermines mass support for Europe's political integration” (Rohrschneider, 2002). These allegations reveal a failure to meet citizens' expectations which has increased the fracture between European citizens and the European Union (EU) institutions (Colomina, 2020, p. 49).

This is why the European Union, through the European Commission (EC), uses the institution's flagship programmes as vehicles to enhance its reputation. This is especially evident in programmes such as Erasmus+, whose main objective is educational, but which already includes certain references to this reality both in its 2021-2027 strategy and in its strategic communication plans. The official webpage of Erasmus+ states as the second and third most relevant objectives of the programme include the “support of the

European Pillar of Social Rights” and the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (European Commission, 2021), bringing to light the EU institutions concern with the gap between the institutions performance and the European youth perceptions and expectations.

In particular, the EU makes use of the Erasmus+ programme to **reinforce the European identity** in order to **alleviate the effects of political disaffection** among young Europeans and the consequent **youth disengagement with EU politics**. The concept political disaffection refers to the set of feelings and attitudes telling of the low appreciation and esteem that citizens have for public life and its institutions (García Marzá, 2015, p. 95). The European Union has even referred to these problems in communications between the different institutions as follows: "Europe cannot afford wasted talent, social exclusion, or disengagement among its youth. Young people should not only be architects of their own life, but also contribute to positive change in society” (European Commission, 2018, p. 1). This document is telling of the way in which , often, the EU misunderstands that this political disaffection is accompanied by unusual phenomena such as a strong participatory dynamism on the part of young people who use their lack of interest, commitment, and participation to create initiatives, platforms and citizens' movements (García Marzá, 2015, p. 97). Therefore, it can be said that the EU tends to speak of a lack of participation on the part of youth only because they have changed the political battlefield and find informal actions more effective in making their demands heard (European Commission, 2022).

This fracture or communication deficits between the institution and the public, are also significant when addressing the problem of a **lack of a clear European identity** with which young people do not feel identified with and the problems this causes with regard to the expansion of the EU integration project. Scholars such as Colomina (2020) even consider that the idea of the European Union has been shaped over the years through the process of integration and the set of shared values that are now being challenged by the political environment at a national level in the Member States (MS)<sup>1</sup>. It should be understood that

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<sup>1</sup> This has been particularly visible in the recent years with the emergence of Euroscepticism.

the European Union is not an end, but an ongoing process and that, as such, **the identity of this project evolves over time according to social situations and the status quo**. The European citizens do not have a single, shared idea of Europe, which is why the EU needs to win the battle of perceptions back (Colomina, 2020, p. 46) and take back control over the idea of the European identity. To this end, the European Commission uses the Erasmus+ programme to reassess the concept of European civil society and to use civil society as a basis for a favourable public opinion (García Marzá, 2015, pp. 104-105) towards the EU.

The major problems of the European Union and the way in which the institution has chosen to face them, institutional communication, speaks of the relevance that the communication strategy of the Erasmus+ programme presents in terms of legitimacy and the fight against disaffection in the European Union. In particular, in the most relevant population sector to guarantee the future of the European Union integration project: its youth.

## 2. Purpose and Motivation

In the past few years, legitimacy and integrity of both local and international European public institutions has been challenged by generalised populist movements and political disaffection. The effects of these movements have been experienced first-hand by the European Union given its status as a supranational organisation on the European continent. The strategies and ways in which the EU deals with major threats to its integrity have also been the focus of conflict on numerous occasions. For example, in dealing with the effects of migration crises or the recent COVID-19 crisis.

However, despite the criticisms, I believe that the EU is trying to do its part to reinforce its reputation in the Member States and that the benefits of being part of this institution outweigh the costs. In my view, the European Union is an irreversible process and that we European citizens must live with it and do our part in order to be able to continue to jointly confront the major threats to democratic systems. For me this dissertation as an opportunity to contribute with my grain of salt to the European integration process and to enhance the legitimacy of the European project by bring it closer to what I consider to

be the most important target audience to ensure its continuity: the European youth.

Personally, I have been able to experience these efforts at first hand by being part of the Erasmus+ programme in all its facets. On an academic level, I have had the opportunity to benefit from the mobility programmes and, on a professional level, I have been part of the projects funded by the European Commission under Erasmus+.

This experience has provided me with the necessary inspiration for this dissertation, as I have been able to be part of this project and, therefore, I have been able to see its lights and shadows. Particularly in the communication arena.

The purpose of this work revolves around two axes. Firstly, the aim is to review the communication strategy of the Erasmus+ programme, placing special emphasis on its efficiency in mitigating the effects of political disaffection and youth disenchantment with the institution. Secondly, it aims to analyse possible pain points and propose possible suggestions for improvement that could help the European institutions to improve their communication strategy.

### 3. State of the Art and Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Euroscepticism: legitimacy and political disaffection as the basis of Erasmus+

In the academic arena, it is generally agreed that the aims of the European integration project collide with the supranational, transnational, and intergovernmental nature of the European Union (Colomina, 2020, p. 50). Being an international political institution makes the Union particularly vulnerable to phenomena such as low **state legitimacy** and high **political disaffection** levels. According to Gilley, state legitimacy is defined as the “degree of citizens’ support to those that execute political power in the given country” (Gilley, 2012). Nonetheless, the confidence in political institutions and leaders on behalf of the citizenship is not a given and must be earned on a continuous basis through demonstrations of efficient political performance and good governance. It is precisely the disenchantment with government’s management that leads to a disconnection of the citizenship to the political system challenging the levels of social support, which is often referred to by political scientists as political disaffection (Del-Castillo-Feito, Cachón-

Rodríguez, & Paz-Gil, 2022, p. 89).

At a European level, state legitimacy and political disaffection are often analysed under the umbrella of **Euroscepticism** defined by Michael Ray as “European political doctrine that advocates disengagement from the European Union (EU)” to which political parties that sympathise with the “dismantling or streamlining of the EU bureaucratic structure” adhere to (Ray, 2016). Euroscepticism is, in essence, the effect of political disaffection in the legitimacy levels of the EU institutions.

Legitimacy constitutes the assurance of social, economic, and political stability for any democratic (and non-democratic) government (Blanco-González, Prado-Román, & Díez-Martín, 2017), which makes it an essential variable to consider and monitor at a European level, both with regards to national legitimacy and EU legitimacy. Over the last decades, there has been a growing concern and interest about the citizens’ political disaffection with the political institutions and their representatives (Escamilla, 2020, p. 604) and the link between state legitimacy (social support) and political disaffection. These efforts answer the needs of governments and supranational institutions to monitor and manage legitimacy levels for the sake of stability and survival.

Since the very beginning of European integration project, the political-related realms have constantly studied the determinants of state legitimacy at an international level, its effects on European democracies and its effects on EU institutions. Del Castillo Feito, Chachón Rodríguez and

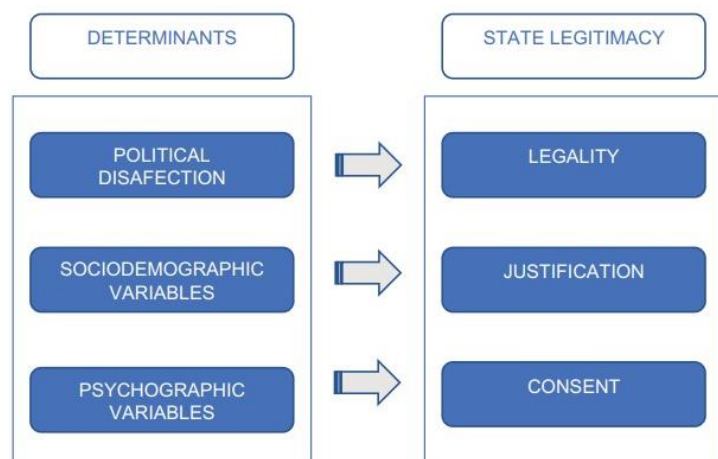


Figure 1. Influence of political disaffection, sociodemographic, and psychographic variables on state legitimacy (Del-Castillo-Feito, Cachón-Rodríguez, & Paz-Gil, 2022)

Paz-Gil (2022) state that, in fact, political disaffection is one of the three main determinants of state legitimacy in European countries and EU institutions, together with sociodemographic variables and psychographic variables. In their proposed model, they

suggest three different dimensions of state legitimacy and analyse its relationship with the above-mentioned determinants. In this research, the variable political disaffection takes into consideration national identity (individual's identification with its country), political ideology and representativeness (feeling represented by the political institutions). All of these dimensions were found to have a strong influence on state legitimacy levels. According to the authors, "the greater the political disaffection, the lower the levels of state legitimacy a country will receive" (Del-Castillo-Feito, Cachón-Rodríguez, & Paz-Gil, 2022, p. 99).

Concerning the sociodemographic and psychographic factors, scholars have studied the effects of these variables in the European institutions' social support. The literature review suggests the following as the most significant realities to take into consideration.

With regards to these determinants, the 2008 economic recession appears to have a great impact on social support. Authors such as Revilli (2015), Báez Lechuga (2016), Alonso (2017), and Escamilla (2020) highlight the way in which the budgetary austerity policies, socio-political instability, high youth unemployment rates, job insecurity, increased poverty, and the risk of exclusion as a consequence of the crisis have affected levels of legitimacy both at a national and at the EU level. Even the European Commission in the COM (2018) 269 (final) claims that "for the first time since the Second World War, there is a real risk that today's young generation will end up less well-off than their parents" due to the economic downturns suffered since 2008.

Political scientists often rely on demography and psychographic factors such as immigration perceptions, being part of a discriminated group or religious beliefs to understand the reasons behind distrust and low levels of state legitimacy. In the case of the European Union, these same issues are reflected in regional differences (for instance, political cleavages such as the North vs South narratives) and the paradox of the horizontal Europeanisation project (Colomina, 2020, p. 47).

It is precisely these factors that are of concern to the European Union in terms of maintaining optimal levels of legitimacy as a guarantee of its future survival. The effect of



the lack of trust and legitimacy in the institutions has led to a serious lack of identification with the European Union and with being a European citizen on the part of young people in recent years (Escamilla, 2020, p. 604). The European Union is carrying out great efforts through the Erasmus+ programme to enhance the feeling of belonging of the European youth and to work with the youth's disaffection with politics. The Erasmus+ programme is therefore presented by the European Commission as the European institutions' flagship measure to contain this situation "promoting European citizenship as a form of personal, occupational, and social development" (Escamilla, 2020, p. 608). Thus, the Erasmus+ Programme policies, intend to minimise the impact of the political disaffection, sociodemographic and psychographic determinants of legitimacy.

### 3.2 The evolution of the Erasmus+ Programme

According to Javier M. Valle, as stated in the articles 57, 118 and 128 of the Treaty of Rome (1957), "the European Union has had a remarkable interest in fostering Vocational Education and Training from its very beginning" (de Olagüe Smithson, 2017, p. 182). Since the first implementation of the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, ERASMUS (87/327/ECC) in 1987, the education mobility programmes of the European Union have evolved significantly. The beginning of the twentieth century was marked by major treaties concerning education at European level. Bologna (1999), the Lisbon Agenda (2000) and Copenhagen (2002) began to introduce the idea of a **European knowledge-based economy** (de Olagüe Smithson, 2017, p. 180) in which education, capitalism and meritocracy go hand in hand. Since 2002, the EU has strengthened its commitment to youth policies with the aim of overcoming political disaffection, equal opportunities and improving political participation (European Commission, 2018). However, it will not be until 2014 with the implementation of the current Erasmus+ and the European Commission's 2017 strategy that we will see how the institution precisely sets as a fundamental objective of the Erasmus+ Programme "to strengthen European identity through education and culture" (Asenjo Gómez, Urosa Sanz, & Valle López, 2021, p. 27).

In 2007, the European Commission approved the first programme to provide for the exchange of educational experiences at all levels of education: **the Lifelong Learning**

**Programme (LLP).** This programme was divided in 4 sub-programmes: Comenius for schools, Erasmus for higher education, Leonardo da Vinci for vocational education and training, Grundtvig for adult education and Jean Monnet actions with regards to fostering European integration (de Olagüe Smithson, 2017, p. 192). As annexed programmes to the LLP, the Commission also had **Youth in Action initiatives**, fostering non-formal learning activities for the youth (European Commission, 2012, p. 1), and other **higher education cooperation programmes** such as Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alfa or Edulink.

In 2014, the LLP, Youth in Action and the higher education projects came together to establish an umbrella programme which, under the same principles, aimed to strengthen the EU's

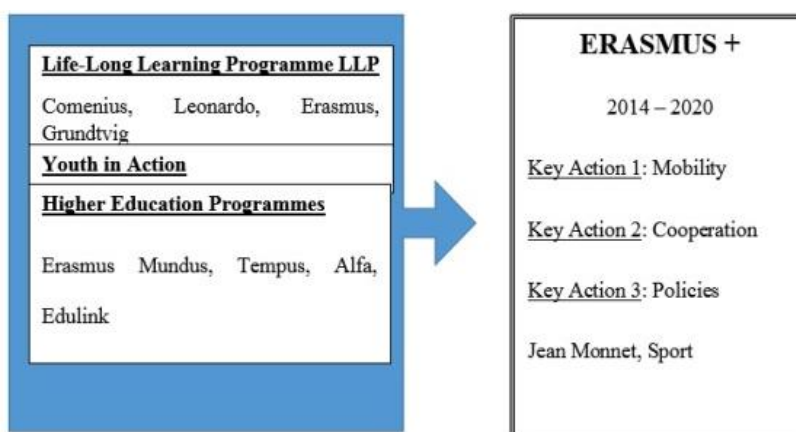


Figure 2 European Commission education initiatives that make up the current Erasmus+ Programme (de Olagüe Smithson, 2017)

transnational education programmes and respond to the challenges of a fast-changing world in an efficient and unified manner: the Erasmus+ programme.

### 3.3 Main objectives of the Erasmus+ Programme

The creation of this reinforced framework for educational cooperation was accompanied by a redefinition of its objectives and actions. In 2019, the European Commission clearly defined the **objectives** of the new Erasmus+ and the main actions associated with each of these new goals.

Defining these objectives was a complex process for European institutions concerned about the fracture between the European Union and European youth. A clear example of this is the EU Youth Strategy 2017, in which the Commission places special emphasis on aspects such as the strengthening of youth initiatives like the EU Youth Dialogue, Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps to improve communication and mutual understanding (European Commission, 2018). The strong focus on improving youth

participation, active listening between youth and political institutions and the attempt to improve levels of political disaffection was materialised in this strategy under the slogan "**Engage** (fostering youth participation in democratic life), **Connect** (bringing the European youth together), **Empower** (supporting youth empowerment)" (European Commission, 2018).

For the achievement of the three cornerstones of this strategy, the Erasmus+ Programme was presented as the perfect framework, given its ability to inspire young people to become more politically active after an educational and personal experience that allows them to experience European values and European identity at first hand. In fact, in line with the objective of achieving a knowledge-based economy in the wake of a global pandemic, the Europe 2020 strategy emphasises not only the use of Erasmus+ as an instrument for combating political disaffection and improving political participation, but also as a guarantee for improving the social situation of young Europeans (de Olagüe Smithson, 2017, p. 196). Bearing these aspects in mind and taking the discussed variables into consideration, the European Commission updated the Erasmus+ programme in 2021, will place greater focus on social inclusion, the green and digital transitions, and promoting young people's participation in democratic life (European Commission, 2021).

According to the European Commission (2021), the new Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027) will be focused on:

- Objective 1: "Promoting learning mobility of individuals and groups, as well as cooperation, quality, excellence inclusion, equity, creativity, and innovation at organisational and policy levels in the fields of education and training"
- Objective 2: "Promoting non-formal and informal learning mobility and active participation among young people, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity, and innovation at organisational and policy levels in the field of youth"
- Objective 3: "Promoting learning mobility of sports staff, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity, and innovation in sport"

In addition, the Jean Monnet Programme centred upon research, training, and critical

thinking in the area of European Union studies at a global level while spot-related actions aim to explore further possibilities of collaborative partnerships and to organise non-profit sport events at an EU level (de Olagüe Smithson, 2017, p. 195). According to the Erasmus+ Annual Report 2020, the 3 main objectives of the programme will be achieved through the following **actions**:

- “Key action 1: Learning mobility of individuals
- Key action 2: Cooperation among organisations and institutions
- Key action 3: Support to policy development and cooperation” (European Commission; Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture , 2021)

### 3.4 The Erasmus+ Programmes: an efficient way to communicate the European Union's interests?

The Erasmus+ Programme, contrary to popular belief, is not only responsible for the management of international educational exchanges. Within the framework of Erasmus+, there are also language courses that are made available to people enrolled in these educational placements and other projects funded by the Commission that aim to foster European values. These projects highlight the importance of non-formal activities in promoting a unified European citizenship.

Moreover, these projects have proven to be efficient in achieving the programme's objectives. Escamilla (2020) conducted research in which he asked participants of the *Erasmus+ Democracy Builders - Tools and Skills for Participatory Democracy* project about their perceptions of the European Union before and after being part of this initiative in an active way. After analysing the responses of the 36 participants, aged between 18 and 30 from 8 EU or accession countries, the author found a significant increase in the feeling of belonging to the EU, thus demonstrating that the programme had the capacity to increase European citizenship in young people (Escamilla, 2020, pp. 610-612).

However, there are other sectors within the academic world that are more sceptical about the ability of the Erasmus+ programme to change young people's attitudes or perceptions of the European Union. This trend notes the importance of analysing the absence of significant identity modifications in the Erasmus population or, at least, with

consistent scientific evidence. The research of Asenjo Gómez et al. (2021) can shed further light on this issue. The authors developed a questionnaire based on conclusions drawn by authors such as Mitchell and Greischel, which showed that those who decide to enrol in an Erasmus experience, before arriving at the host university, already have better knowledge and a more favourable prior pro-European attitude than those who do not (Asenjo Gómez, Urosa Sanz, & Valle López, 2021, pp. 28-32). These findings are of utmost importance, as they are the key evidence that the communication strategy of the Erasmus+ programme is ineffective in reaching the right target audiences, as the European Commission is focusing its communication efforts on publics that are already favourable to their interests.

In order to fulfil the objective of this study, the analysis of the communication strategy of the Erasmus+ Programmes and the suggestion of further/possible improvements, the framework for the creation of communication strategies in public institutions proposed by the Government of Navarra appears to be an effective tool. This methodology divides the creation of communication strategies in public institutions into 10 fundamental stages which will be further explained in the analysis section of this paper.

#### 4. Research Goals and Questions

As has already been advanced in the Purpose and Motivation section, the fundamental objectives of this bachelor thesis are the following.

- To analyse the situation of the Erasmus+ programme and its communication policy as well as its efficiency in reducing the impact of major problems such as political disaffection
- To provide possible proposals for improving the Erasmus+ communication strategy to become a programme capable of facing other challenges in the future and consolidating the European identity of the European youth.

#### 5. Methodology

The methodology used in this work is based on a literature review of academic sources on the subject area. The bibliographic sources used have been selected after conducting research in specialised databases such as JSTOR and the European Union databases as

well as the official documents referring to the European Commission's communication strategy. The search criteria were mainly the topics of the documents, reviewing the last 5 years of specialised journals in the field (i. e., European Journal of Political Research, The Political Quarterly and Journal of Common Market Studies) and fundamental EU official documents on Erasmus+.

## 6. Analysis and Discussion

In order to be able to answer the research questions, the strategies and methods implemented by the European Commission to communicate its objectives and interests through the Erasmus+ Programme initiatives should be analysed in the following section. According to the Spanish government Erasmus+ official page, the Spanish Service for the Internationalisation of Education (el Servicio Español para la Internacionalización de la Educación - **SEPIE**) and the Spanish National Agency (la Agencia Nacional Española - ANE), integrated in Institute for the Youth (el Instituto de la Juventud - **INJUVE**), are the two agencies in charge of the Erasmus+ programmes in Spain (Spanish Government, n.d.). As an organisation part of the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, INJUVE is in charge of the implementation of the 2020 Youth Strategy of the Spanish government whose main concern are “the different actions that affect young people on education and training, employment and training, employment and entrepreneurship, housing, health, leisure and sport, participation, participation, volunteering, coexistence and inclusion” (Instituto de la Juventud (INJUVE), 2020). In this sense, INJUVE is in charge of the dissemination of the management of Erasmus+, while the SEPIE has a greater control over communication efforts. Both organisations are in charge of supervising the implementation of the **Communication and Visibility Rules of the European Commission** (2021). Together with this communication manual, the European Commission (EC) provides the beneficiaries of the Erasmus+ funded programmes with the **How to Communicate your Project Guide** (2021), in which the EC provides a more practical approach to implement the communication actions of the projects as well as a guide for the creation of communication management strategies.

These two documents are understood to be the basis of the Erasmus+ communication strategy as, **neither the Directorate-General for Communication nor the European Commission, provide beneficiaries with a unified and clear communication strategy in**

**which the objectives and actions to be implemented by Erasmus+ projects and mobility programmes are described in a sufficiently definite and direct manner.** Considering the previously mentioned documents, the literature review and the communications between the different institutions concerning the Erasmus+ communication strategy, the following conclusions can be drawn.

### 6.1 Step 1: Analysis of the Environment – local, social, and organisational context

In recent years, we have experienced a great deal of change at a frenetic speed. This has led several theorists to make use of concepts such as the widely known VUCA and BANI environments, to explain the complexities of our current reality. The acronym VUCA stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous, while the concept **BANI** (Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible) goes one step further and refers to the current reality marked by the inability of humans to fully understand and assimilate the fast growing changes in the world at all levels at the speed at which they occur (Grabmeier, 2020).

The world of communication is no exception. New technologies and interconnectivity between actors have expanded to unimaginable levels the strategic and management possibilities. Nonetheless, these changes have impacted the way in which communication actions are carried out in both the public and private sectors. According to Canel and Luoma-aho (2019), changes are particularly visible in terms of citizens' demands and expectations, diversity issues, communication practices and in the renewed role of citizens. This section aims to explain the changes in the environment, their effect on the concept of European citizenship and, hence, the consequences this has had on the European Union's communication plans.

#### 6.1.1 Changes at all levels: changing world, changing expectations, changing demands

According to Thijs and Staes (2008), expectations are presumptions or projections based on previous experience, personal needs, and both the implicit and explicit communication on behalf of a given public body. Expectations are the adequacy of the individual's opinion with regards to the organisation's performance and behaviour and the public institutions' ability to meet such presumptions. Insufficient expectations management policies may lead to what Hill calls the **Capability-Expectations Gap**. In the case of the European Union,

the European Commission and the EU institutions lack the political structure or are not given sufficient resources by Member States (MS) to fulfil all citizens' demands (Hill, 1993, p. 315). The inability to meet these expectations creates a gap, a fracture between institutions and citizens. This consequential gap is often referred to by communication scholars as dangerous as it can result in excessive risk-taking and unrealistic policymaking (Hill, 1993, p. 315) on the institutions' side, which might even widen the already existing gap and, thus, have an impact on political disaffection and disenchantment levels with European institutions.

Living in a changing world entails a close, constant, and comprehensive monitoring of expectations to manage these gaps and its effects on legitimacy. Public institutions such as the European Union, before focusing on defining their objectives and communication interests, need to work with potential expectation gaps and understand citizens' expectations (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 248). In fact, according to Coye (2004), communication is understood to be the only resource available to public agencies able to bridge the capability-expectations gap addressing its negative impact in real time.

These changes in expectations and the consequent change in citizens' demands also influences public sector communication departments in the communication tactics and actions arena. In an increasingly interconnected global community, widespread access to information and new technologies allows users to have access to an unprecedented number of sources of information and build relationships with people located on the other side of the world. However, these new avenues to connect people, being mostly digital in nature, tend to lock users into what Sloterdijk calls **cultural bubbles**. Citizens, with their new role as PROSUMERS (producers and consumers of content), have the capacity to act as gatekeepers of the information they received by filtering and choosing the communications they consume, creating an information bubble tailored to their needs and interests (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 6). This change in the citizens' role prompts the use of new tactics in the interest of public bodies to effectively reach their target audiences.

Finally, institutions such as the European Union, need to count on new realities



encouraged, in part, by the previously mentioned changes like the citizens' **superdiversity**. The concept of superdiversity relates to our ability to be in contact with multicultural environments and the way in which this is affecting policy making as, in one way or another, decisions are interconnected at a global level (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 6). This exposure to different and changing environments generates new experiences that bring about changes in citizens' demands and expectations (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 7). These changes and the constant exposure to diverse realities has turned the process of analysing expectations and fulfilling demands into a Herculean task, which severely affects the European identity process building and, therefore, the way in which Erasmus+ communication strategies are framed. If the process of monitoring expectations and demands gets increasingly difficult, public institutions such as the EU are more likely to widen the gap between institutions and citizens, especially, if there is a lack of communication of policy objectives and actions. Communication deficits lead irremediably to the non-fulfilment of citizens' demands due to lack of awareness of the actions taken by the public institution concerned.

#### 6.1.2 The European Identity: have Erasmus+ Programmes proven to be efficient identity-building tools?

At a national, international, and supranational level, political life relies on actors identifying their priorities, setting goals on this basis, and strategizing to achieve a desirable outcome for them. Due to this reason, identity, culture, and the creation of a collective identity are inseparable from the political sphere and appear to be political resource for political authorities seeking to consolidate their power (McNamara & Musgrave, 2019, p. 7). The creation of a collective identity, the European Identity, remains a concern for the European institutions due to the effects its deficit might have on EU legitimacy and institutions. In this section, we will explore the elements of the European identity and the importance of having a well-defined identity in the political field.

McNamara (2019) argues that "EU's cultural infrastructure is rooted in "banal" symbols and practices that navigate national loyalties while portraying the EU as complementary to, rather than hostile to, local identities" which results in "labels, images, and narratives are often deracinated and standardized into blandness". This lack of clarity on the basic principles and elements of European identity poses a serious problem for citizens under

European jurisdiction. Nevertheless, European citizens have found ways to understand what it means to be European without the need for a clear definition of European identity. Several longitudinal studies have revealed that enrolling in an Erasmus+ mobility programme is positively associated to variables related to identification as European and identification with Europe (Prati, Cicognani, & Mazzoni, 2019, p. 3). Others such as Ortega (2015) highlight the importance of education and its impact in the construction of a European identity. On the other hand, we should also consider the findings of Asenjo et al. which show that the level of pre-Erasmus stay Europeanism already implies a high degree of identification with the European Union, i.e., students who decide to do an Erasmus stay already have positive conceptions of the EU and a high sense of belonging to the EU (Asenjo Gómez, Urosa Sanz, & Valle López, 2021, p. 33).

This reality raises a fundamental question about the communication and efficiency of the Erasmus+ programme. Is the European Union reaching the right audiences, or does the Erasmus+ programme only serve to reinforce the positive expectations about the EU of those young people who identify with the institution? In this sense, the question to analyse would be the real capacity of the Erasmus+ programme to achieve a greater degree of attachment and identification with the European Union on behalf of the youth that might not have a strong sense of belonging to the EU.

According to the Eurobarometer, youth political participation reached low levels in the 2019 European Elections in which only 42% of young people participated, making them one of the sectors of the population with the lowest turnout levels (Escamilla, 2020, p. 606). Rising number of changes make room for new strategies in the public sector like the Europe 2020 Strategy of the European Commission to reduce the impact of new/emerging realities. In the case of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the strategy focuses on a “fast-moving world” in which “long-term challenges – globalisation, pressure on resources, ageing– intensify” (European Commission, 2010, p.3). The European Commission's numerous strategies, such as the Europe 2020 Strategy, aim precisely to put an end to uncertainty by creating certainties or foundations on which the integration project can rely on. In the case of Erasmus+, according to its founding objectives (article 2), the main objective of this programme is "to strengthen relations between citizens of

the different Member States in order to consolidate the concept of a Citizens' Europe" or European Citizenship (Asenjo Gómez, Urosa Sanz, & Valle López, 2021, p. 26).

However, the academic literature leads to the conclusion that these methods are ineffective as young people feel increasingly marginalised, alienated from the European reality, given the increasing barriers for those who want their viewpoints heard by political decision-makers (Escamilla, 2020, p. 606). Authors such as Stocker (2006) and Hay (2007) are concerned that this political disconnection is being exploited by Europe's radical right to promote xenophobic ideas, strengthen nationalist movements, citizen insecurity and Euroscepticism (Escamilla, 2020, p. 606).

To understand the magnitude of these problems, the cleavage between Northern and Southern states should be highlighted. The data compiled from Eurostat proves that the economic crisis of 2008 did not have the same impact on the northern and southern states due to the different effects of the economic recession on youth unemployment levels, poverty and social exclusion rates, which were much higher in the southern states (Escamilla, 2020, p. 604). According to the European Commission (2018), youth at risk of social exclusion are underrepresented across the board. This problem must be analysed in depth by decision-makers who have to make participation a reality for young people through transparency in their actions and communicative actions accessible to all through the appropriate channels to promote their participation (European Commission, 2018, p. 2). Additionally, the academic literature considerations regarding the implementation of affirmative policies (policies in which young people have a central role through the provision of the necessary tools by the institutions to empower them to decide about their future development) appear to be an essential element to face political disaffection (Escamilla, 2020, p. 607).

To sum up, in order to frame an Erasmus+ efficient communication strategy we should bear in mind the following aspects: (1) the concept of "European citizenship" or "European identity" lacks a solid definition, as its evolution and meaning are shaped by the changes brought about by globalisation and the increasing incorporation of new identities with the accession of new member states (Asenjo Gómez, Urosa Sanz, & Valle

López, 2021, p. 27); (2) the lack of a solid concept is a threat to the European project because it reinforces the major threats to the European project. This raises questions about the efficiency of the programme itself and its communication in countering the major challenges and threats facing the European Union.

## 6.2 Step 2: Objectives

This section will focus on the analysis of the objectives. For a proper analysis of the objectives, we will focus firstly on the objectives of the Erasmus+ participants and secondly on the objectives of the European Union. This will lead us to define the communication objectives of the Erasmus+ programme while providing us with the necessary knowledge to make recommendations to the competent authorities.

### 6.2.1 The European Union's Erasmus+ communication objectives

According to the guidelines of the Government of Navarra, when creating a communication strategy, we must define strategic/long-term and tactical/short term objectives. To fulfil the purpose of this dissertation, there will be a greater focus on strategic objectives. These objectives must also follow the **SMART model**, which means they need to be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound (Government of Navarra, 2016). This methodology is also shared by the European Commission (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 11).

The Erasmus+ Programmes' beneficiaries are bound to comply with the communications-related regulations envisaged by the European Commission and described in the "Communication and Visibility Rules. Guidance for Member States" official documents and the indications provided in the guidance "How to communicate your project". In these two official European Commission documents, the main strategic objectives of the Erasmus+ programmes are not clearly defined. In the case of the Guidance for Member States, there is a section stating that beneficiaries should rely on the Commission's priorities to define the communication objectives and that they are indeed by the EU bound to do so (European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, 2021, p. 17). However, this guide lacks a clear definition of these objectives and instead provides a series of links to beneficiaries of information on the institution's priorities (page 17) rather than providing suggestions to turn these goals into clearly defined objectives. The

“How to communicate your project” guide only briefly mentions 5 steps to be taken into account when developing a communication strategy (communication objectives, target audience(s), key message(s), activities and channels and the establishment of a communication performance indicator) (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 10). This lack of definition poses a serious problem for both the European Commission and the Erasmus+ programmes beneficiaries.

On the one hand, the objectives and nature of each Erasmus+ programme differ greatly according to the projects’ priorities, which should be considered when defining the Erasmus+ Communication Strategy. For example, in the case of the programme “Why to Believe in the European Union” (2016-2-ES02-KA105-008069) the main objectives of the project include: “(1) to approach the EU and its institutions; (2) develop their European citizenship, European values and their sense of belonging to Europe (in an active way); and (3) know the opportunities offered by the EU in the fields of labour and education.” (European Commission, 2016, p. 2). Nevertheless, other projects such as “Promoting Statistics and Big Data through Gamification and Digital Education” (2020-1-ES01-KA226-HE-095688) aim to prepare the European Youth for the digital era by providing education on Big Data through the creation of gamification-based teaching materials (European Commission, 2020, p. 2). The differences among the objectives of the projects poses a challenge for the European Union to define a unique set of goals for the EC funded Erasmus+ programmes and to determine the ways in which these goals can be turned into communication objectives and actions.

On the other hand, in spite of the programmes differing features, the projects are based upon the common objectives of Erasmus+ (European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, 2021, p. 17). Therefore, although the documents indicate the availability of the institutions to consult communication guidelines (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 7), the European Union should do more to provide more plausible guidelines to the beneficiaries of the programmes. Even when the programmes’ *raison d’être* differs in nature, the EC funded projects are all part of Erasmus+ whose objectives are clearly defined and are sufficiently broad to act as a basis for the definition of the project-specific communication strategies.

This lack of definition is not only a problem for beneficiaries when defining the communication objectives of the projects, but also generates excessively different expectations among the Erasmus+ population about the European institutions and their identity as Europeans.

### 6.2.2 The Erasmus+ Participants' expectations and motivations

Now that the objectives of the European Union have been analysed, the needs of citizens and their expectations of the Programme should be evaluated. Lesjak et al. (2015) conducted research in which they asked a total of 360 subjects about their priorities and expectations when participating in the programme. The authors concluded that there is a mismatch between the participants "having fun" oriented motives and the career and personal development objectives of the Erasmus+ Programme (Lesjak, Juvan, M. Ineson, H. T. Yap, & Podovšovnik Axelsson, 2015, p. 861).

Rank	Items	Mean	SD
1	Experience something new*	4.666	0.659
2	Grow personally*	4.550	0.819
3	To learn about different cultures*	4.497	0.837
4	Meet new people*	4.483	0.803
5	To have a semester away from home*	4.405	1.021
6	Improve foreign language	4.322	1.100
7	Experience European identity	4.013	1.138
8	Experience different educational system	3.986	1.098
9	To improve my academic knowledge	3.808	1.031
10	Enhance employment opportunities	3.755	1.125
11	New contacts in field of studies	3.383	1.197
12	Academic support for my thesis	2.405	1.296
13	Take advantage of ERASMUS grant	2.400	1.327
14	It was compulsory	1.669	1.175

*Figure 3 Ranking of Enrolees Erasmus+ Mobility Motives (Lesjak, Juvan, M. Ineson, H. T. Yap, & Podovšovnik Axelsson, 2015)*

These objectives include personal growth, experience something new or meeting new people, for instance, while other interests like experience European identity, which have closest affinity to the EU Erasmus+ objectives, are relegated to lower ranges. This mismatch between the objectives of the European Union and the citizenship objectives is telling of the current situation with regards to the communication gap between the EU and its youth.

### 6.3 Step 3: Target Audience

The Recital 11 of the Financial Regulations of the Erasmus+ Programmes, in accordance with Article 15 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) states that “Communication should be more targeted and should aim to increase the visibility of the Union contribution for citizens.” (European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, 2021). The beneficiaries of the programme, according to Article 22 of the Common Provisions Regulation, should define “its objectives, target audiences, communication channels, including social media outreach, where appropriate, planned budget and relevant indicators for monitoring and evaluation” (European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, 2021, p. 31). According to del Castillo Feito et al. (2022), we must take into account the differentiating features of our audiences, as not taking into account the diversity within these groups and its demographic characteristics, political perceptions and psychographic variables can affect the levels of public acceptance and, consequently, the legitimacy of a given public body (Del-Castillo-Feito, Cachón-Rodríguez, & Paz-Gil, 2022).

García Marzá (2015) proposes that we should understand civil society through the analysis of three basic features. Firstly, we must consider the **plurality** of the public and the extent to which their personal and collective interests coincide with the general interests of the society in which they take part in (García Marzá, 2015, p. 109). Secondly, **degree of radicalisation**, as citizens make use of all the institutions within their reach and are, therefore, affected by their actions, which highly influences the citizens’ opinion on the governments’ performance. The extent of this impact must always be a variable to considered. Finally, we must bear in mind that we live in a global society that **demand participation** in public life, more often than not, by the use of non-traditional communication channels. All these factors, together with the aforementioned sociodemographic and psychographic variables, must be taken into account when defining the target audiences’ our communication strategy aims to influence.

In the case of Erasmus+ programmes, given the variety of target audiences, **it is difficult to define audiences at a more specific level than "young Europeans"**. The European Commission, when thinking and funding Erasmus+ programmes, should make an analysis

of the sectors within the European youth population in need of these programmes before carrying out communication actions. In this sense, they should communicate the beneficiaries the reasons behind the project and the target audiences they expect to reach through the implementation of those actions. This appears as relevant when it comes to identifying and influencing publics that might not be favourable to the institution, as the behaviour of these groups can often not be modified through communication (Government of Navarra, 2016, p. 32). Additionally, these audiences tend to be more difficult to reach due to their lack of interest in the institutions which requires of constant contact between the EC and the project beneficiaries in order to find the most effective communication solutions to achieve the institutions' goals.

#### 6.4 Step 4: The Message(s)

At this stage of the communication strategy, public institutions must identify the message they want the audience to hear and believe, which involves developing the message(s) briefly in a clear sentence (Government of Navarra, 2016, p. 33). The Communication Guidance of the commission advice to link a communication objective to a target audience and then, define a message per target audience (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 11). According to the academic literature, these messages should be linked to the audiences' priorities as well as the ethical principles the given organisation represents (García Marzá, 2015, p. 102). Often, these messages are linked to a call to action (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 26), which is especially relevant in the Erasmus+ programme where increased citizen participation is presented as one of the central axes of the projects.

In the communication guidance documents of the Erasmus+ Programme, however, we have not found any specific indications on what these messages should look like or how to frame them. The only reference to the importance of messages was found in the How to Communicate Your Project document stating that messages are what we want to say to our audiences (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 10).

#### 6.5 Step 5: The Strategy

In reference to the communication strategy, we found a fundamental problem: lack of a unified document or strategy in which the EC explains the beneficiaries are how to deal



with a communication strategy in a detailed manner. In the vast majority of cases, the communication of the projects is carried out by the beneficiaries themselves (European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, 2021).

After the assignment of projects on behalf of the EU institutions to which the beneficiaries have already presented a communication strategy, the beneficiaries receive a document including a detailed division of tasks at all levels among the working teams of the Erasmus+ project (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 10). In these documents, the European Commission divides the workload including communication actions. This methodology **may cause confusion between objectives and tactics** (specific actions) (Government of Navarra, 2016, p. 35).

When managing a communication strategy following the Commissions' indications, the following issues might arise:

1. **The division of labour can lead to confusion among the members of the projects' work teams.** If the communication strategy is decentralized and there are no strong internal communication channels in place, on numerous occasions, this can lead to certain communication actions deviating from the programmes' objectives. To prevent this situation, the team members must coordinate the communication initiatives, which is encouraged by the European Commission in the Strategic Communication documents (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, pp. 9-10)
2. **The majority of beneficiaries are not communication professionals, so they use the tools at their disposal (not professional communication softwares) to be able to comply with the Commission's requirements.** This is especially visible in the How to communicate your project document in which the proposed strategy (see figure 4) and advised amateur software for content creation and graphic design (Canva and Designspiration) (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 15) reveal there is no professional communication team involved in the creation of communication strategies and digital content.

## Annex 1

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

## Annex 2

COMMUNICATION PLAN

COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVE	TARGET AUDIENCE	KEY MESSAGE	COMMUNICATION ACTIVITY	CHANNEL	INDICATORS	TIMELINE	ACTIVITY	CHANNEL	OBJECTIVE SMART	TARGET AUDIENCES	KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	OWNER

Figure 4 Suggested templates to design the Communication Strategy and the Communication Plan (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, pp. 44-45)

It is also important to highlight the use of communication channels, as the Erasmus+ channels contribute to the overarching communication objective of the Commission that is to improve citizens', especially younger generations' opinion of the EU (European Commission; Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture, 2021, p. 15). The use of the word of mouth appears as essential for the basic functioning of the mobility programmes of Erasmus+. In the case of the EU funded projects, the European Commission recommends the identification of activities and the use of appropriate channels in order to obtain the most performance of the chosen resources (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 11). There is a special emphasis on digital channels due to their cost-effectiveness. For instance, in terms of external communication, the European Commission suggests the use of "appropriate channels, such as web pages, stakeholder meetings, social media, information brochures on EU funding etc." (European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, 2021, p. 16). Other related issues such as funding or timelines, which are also part of the strategy, will be discussed in the following sections.

### 6.6 Step 6: Communication Actions

According to the Art. 34(1) of the EU Regulation 241/2021 with regards to Information, communication and publicity of the EC funded programmes, "The Commission may engage in communication activities to ensure the visibility of the Union funding for the financial support envisaged in the relevant recovery and resilience plan, including through joint communication activities with the national authorities concerned. The Commission

may, as appropriate, ensure that support under the Facility is communicated and acknowledged through a funding statement.” The European Commission emphasizes that communication strategies cannot be implemented without proper planning given their complexity with regards to the number of actors involved, the number of channels and the different stages of the projects (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 9).

The European Commission encourages beneficiaries to involve the institutions and Member States in their communication by carrying out joint actions to ameliorate the actions’ impact in the desired publics (European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, 2021, p. 23). In fact, according to the article 18 of the Common Provisions Regulation, the EC also has the obligation to “implement information and communication actions” (European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, 2021, p. 25). The actions of the Erasmus+ projects are very specific and depend on the nature of the project itself. In spite of this, it can be said that there are certain widespread practices within the projects, such as the creation of social media accounts together with the creation of a visual identity for the contents of the communication campaign (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021). It should be taken into consideration that the usefulness of social media is placed in relation with individuals’ needs and the ability of a social network particular features to meet citizens’ expectations (Velasquez & Rojas, 2017, p. 2)

For the communication strategy of the Erasmus+ programmes, it should not be forgotten that the best communication strategy is always linked to the explanation of the action – visibility of the actions appears as essential for legitimacy in the eyes of the European citizens (Government of Navarra, 2016, p. 35).

### 6.7 Step 7: Timeline

The timeline establishes the schedule of the communication strategy by planning how long and when the communication actions will take place (Government of Navarra, 2016, p. 45). The European institutions highly encourage beneficiaries to include a calendar in their communication strategies (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 12), as the Erasmus+ projects tend to last 2 or 3 years (European Commission, 2020, p. 141). There

is an especial mention to timeline when it comes to the content strategy in which the European Commission advises beneficiaries to revise the publications calendar on a monthly basis due to possible changes in the world reality (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 25). Timeline is also considered part of the communication strategy that depends on the nature of the project.

### 6.8 Step 8: Budget

“Expenditure related to communication and visibility is part of the action and is in principle eligible for EU funding provided they fulfil the eligibility criteria as any other cost incurred for the action” (European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, 2021, p. 26). In budgetary terms, the beneficiaries should include a prediction of the budget that will be expended on communication actions and inform the competent authorities of the percentage of the budget dedicated to dissemination (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 12). The budget of the Erasmus+ programmes depend on both the features of the project and the duration and defined by multiplying 12 500 EUR by the duration of the project (in months) and up to 450 000 EUR for projects with duration of 36 months (European Commission, 2020, p. 123). Nevertheless, it should be highlighted that there is no specific percentage of the total budget defined by the EC destined to the projects' communication strategy.

### 6.9 Step 9: Monitoring and Follow-up

According to the article 48 of the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR), the Member states should be involved in the monitoring of communication actions of the Erasmus+ Programmes by appointing a representative in charge of analysing the effectiveness of the actions. Moreover, the European Commission will also monitor the compliance with the communication objectives through the Monitoring Committees (European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, 2021, p. 36). The European Union advises the beneficiaries of the Erasmus+ Programmes to enhance and improve their communication efforts through the evaluation of the following variables: assessment of needs, definition of objectives, communication activities and monitoring their implementation and evaluation according to criteria of effectiveness, relevance, efficiency, coherence and EU-added value (European Commission's Directorate-General for Communication, 2021, p. 15). The European Union suggests monitoring the actions'

performance through the use of surveys (i.e., Google Surveys and Survey monkey) in order to gather information to introduce possible improvements after discussing the results in the follow up sessions of the beneficiaries (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 42).

In monitoring terms, the academic literature suggests the use of surveys, the definition of indicators (financial, compliance, impact, and result indicators), periodic briefings, and annual reports to control the impact of the activities that will allow future enhancement (Government of Navarra, 2016, p. 48).

#### 6.10 Step 10: Final Evaluations

Once the monitoring and control work has been done, it is necessary to evaluate the results of the communication strategy in order to have basic information for future communication actions (Government of Navarra, 2016, p. 51). The European Union suggests its project beneficiaries to carry out their own evaluations based on data collection activities (Strano, Mariani, Alhoud, & Kittler, 2021, p. 41). On a general basis, the beneficiaries have a specific final session to share the results of the actions of the projects including communication activities.

### 7. Conclusions and Proposals

In 2012, Nassim Taleb described in its well-known work “Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder”, the notion of antifragility. Antifragility refers to those elements/things/institutions that are not affected but rather benefit from adversity (Taleb, 2012). Canel and Luoma-aho apply this concept to the communication arena and define the principles that need to be followed by those organisations that thrive to become strong enough to survive adversity and strengthen its intangible assets (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 75).

To create an **Antifragile communication strategy**, public sector organisations should focus on (1) the idea of stakeholder optimisation (plan communication strategies from the stakeholders’ point of view); (2) interests optimisation (stakeholders interests first, organisational interests later); (3) Authentic engagement and coproduction to build communication (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 75).

The European institutions have been trying for years to become an anti-fragile organisation through the use of communication and building citizenship satisfaction. In order to do so, European institutions need to **become “glass bowls”**, which means being inclusive, open and transparent (Bason, 2015, p. 60). The previous sections have analysed one of the European Commission's flagship programmes, the Erasmus+ programme, and its communication strategy. As a result, it can be concluded that the Erasmus+ communication strategy has proven to be insufficient to fulfil the interests of the European Commission and become an antifragile institution capable of facing great threats to its organisational integrity such as Euroscepticism. The results of this research lead us to conclude the following.

The Erasmus+ communication strategy has several problems in terms of its formulation. These problems include:

- (1) **The lack of a unified document or strategy with precise indications for programme beneficiaries/managers with regards to essential elements in the process of framing the communication strategy.** The European Union should define more precisely the following aspects: what are the interests of the Union in implementing a communication strategy, how the specific Erasmus+ programme aims to meet these objectives or improve the situation, and the role of the communication strategy in meeting these objectives. Most of the problems tackled in the Erasmus+ Projects aim to improve the structural problem of political disaffection and improve the European Commissions' image in the eyes of the European Youth. To this end, the European Commission should provide the EC beneficiaries enough information with regards to the environment and the great threats to the EU integrity and the *raison d'être* of the initiatives, which might appear as helpful when defining the projects' communication objectives. Establishing direct communication with citizens and, to this end, an effective communication strategy, are essential elements in order to achieve the institutions' goals by the implementation of the Erasmus+ projects. A greater involvement of the European Commission would also be advisable, especially, at the early stages of the communication strategy definition process.

(2) **Insufficient information provided to the projects' beneficiaries:** As it has been explained in this dissertation, the Erasmus+ communication documents fail to provide enough information to the project beneficiaries. The most basic elements of a communication campaign, such as the formulation of appropriate targets, clear definition of the communication objectives, or an explanation of the most effective communication channels to get the Union's message across to its citizens, are not defined/communicated in an appropriate manner by the competent institutions. This internal communication problems explain the mismatch between the Erasmus+ programme objectives and the citizens' expectations when enrolling in an EU mobility programme. In this sense, it could also be interesting that the European Commission suggests its beneficiaries of possible channels they can use, target audiences they should focus on, the ways in which they can adapt their key messages to the desired target audiences or suggestions with regards to communication actions. Moreover, the European Commission should set the basis for the monitoring of the projects and provide the beneficiaries with possible indicators or even a monitoring software that could help them evaluate the efficiency of communication actions. These two points is closely related to the third conclusion of this research, which appears to be the central problem of the Erasmus+ communication strategy.

(3) **Internal Communication issues go beyond the European Commission's walls.** Nevertheless, the European Commission fails to provide detailed indications to the beneficiaries which, more often than not, lack the training capabilities and resources to successfully implement a communication strategy. This internal communication deficit stretches beyond the bonds of the Union by framing communication strategies that fail to achieve the Commission's goals due to possible misunderstanding/communication deficits between the actors involved in the Erasmus+ Projects. Strategies are not enough and institutions such as the EC should strive first to achieve a more effective internal communication model in order to later frame and implement efficient external communication strategies (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 75)

These problems, instead of helping to alleviate the effects of the European Union's major challenges/threats, further reinforce the existing rift between citizens and institutions. In order to improve in this respect. In order to counteract disaffection, it is necessary to integrate communication and strategic actions so that communication strategies also have validity and moral recognition by citizens (García Marzá, 2015, p. 106). The Erasmus+ communication strategies need of greater coherence with the principles of the Union and European values, which also need to be further defined by the EU institutions. For this reason, to enhance the Erasmus+ Communication strategy, it could be interesting to implement Canel's and Luoma-aho's "steps towards antifragile communication":

**(1) Prior to framing and planning communication actions and strategies, the European Union should strengthen its communication with beneficiaries.**

Internal stakeholders often appear as the most important stakeholder concerning public image. Only the employees that are fully engaged are able to communicate so to the rest of the stakeholders (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 76)

**(2) Listening to both the citizens and the cross-sectorial actors** involved in the Erasmus+ initiatives is crucial, in particular when our objective is to encourage internal communication and public participation. Involvement of National Agencies for Erasmus+ (in the case of Spain, SEPIE and INJUVE) should be encouraged as well as the communication between the beneficiaries of the different programmes (European Union, 2018, p. 12). On some occasions, institutions such as the SEPIE and INJUVE might not have the same objectives, which should be revised by the EC in order to find points in common and frame a common strategy. Furthermore, the Erasmus+ beneficiaries as well as European institutions should make use of citizen involvement strategies and move from messaging to listening and from paying attention to constant interaction with the publics (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 76). The Erasmus+ projects constantly engage with the European citizens and listen to their concerns, as it is the *raison d'être* of the projects. Nevertheless, **the internal communication deficits may hinder the process of listening to citizens' expectations and transforming them into public policy.** The EU should strive to find a state of structural trust in which



constant collaboration with stakeholders and building a relationship with them through communication actions enables the Union to manage political disaffection.

- (3) Moreover, the importance of the **professionalisation of Erasmus+ communication strategies** needs to be underlined. The Commission should provide more resources, training, and human capital to the projects' beneficiaries in order to plan and successfully implement communication strategies. This is particularly relevant in the communication of Erasmus+ mobility programmes, as its communication plans tend to rely excessively on the word of mouth, which results in a loss of control of the messages that are sent to the European population regarding the Erasmus+ Programme.

The current Erasmus+ communication strategy is a good first step in addressing the major threats to the European integration project while engaging the European youth in the construction of a prosperous future. Nevertheless, a greater involvement of the European institutions in framing the EC funded project strategies; more clear indications with regards to the objectives of the Union when implementing the Erasmus+ programmes; more information with regards to communication strategies rather than just focusing on communication actions and a greater professionalisation of the communication strategies appear to be essential factors to improve the current reputation of the European Union and to be able to frame an efficient Erasmus+ communication strategy.

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