



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Europe with a soul needs Erasmus and culture at its heart

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Launch of New Narrative for Europe /Brussels
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The European project is the boldest and most visionary project that Europe has seen in centuries.

The European Union was founded in the 1950s as a way of fostering peace, trust and solidarity. It is true that this vision is fading away with generations of Europeans who tend to believe that peace and stability is a given.

Our young people have no experience of war and this is, of course, wonderful. Nonetheless, too many of our young Europeans know already a lot about uncertainty. Those with a job fear it may not last for long, and those without a job fear they may have to wait for a long time to get one.

This uncertainty makes them vulnerable to despair, to disillusionment with politics (especially party politics), vulnerable to populism and extremism. For those 'not in education, employment and training' the situation is more acute (only 28.7% are interested in politics, compared to 40% of youth in education or employment). Many commentators speak of "a lost generation".

The 'New Narrative for Europe' must convince young people that Europe is and will remain a shared space of opportunities and a credible federator for a more human and fair world.

The policies under my responsibility (education, culture, youth, sport) lie at the heart of what one could call the 'human' and 'social' face of the European project. It is a sensitive area which deserves our immediate attention, if we wish to inspire trust in shared values among young Europeans – and among all Europeans for that matter.

As Jacques Delors said: 'Europe needs a soul'.

The EU must place greater emphasis on initiatives that affect young people's lives on a human level and widen their horizons.

I will only mention a small example. I see it every day when I travel and meet young people who have benefitted from EU programmes such as Erasmus and Youth in Action or young researchers who benefited from Marie Curie Actions. Their vision of Europe, and of themselves in Europe, changes profoundly and for the better. For all these young people, the EU means an opportunity to prove their worth. It means developing a profound respect and appreciation for difference.

Any new narrative must be reaffirmed in terms of values. Europe must be presented not simply a means to an end or as a financial construct, but as a way of life based on shared values such as commitment to freedom, democracy, tolerance and equality, fundamental rights and the rule of law.

The new narrative needs to frame issues that can have a positive impact on the majority. We hear a lot about rising percentages of mistrust in the institutions and in the rule of law, we hear a lot about mistrust linked to corruption, we hear about an elitist Europe of the few. We need to frame these questions in a positive and relevant way.

We need concrete messages that resonate with young people. Young people should be also given the opportunity to respond to that call. Europe should be a shared purpose.

I am therefore delighted that artists and people of culture and of thought have been invited to actively contribute to the debate about the new narrative for Europe.

Shaping a new vision for Europe cannot be left to technocrats or be monopolized by professional politicians. Artists and intellectuals are the story tellers and the critical spirits of our times. They help shape our vision of the world.

Culture can contribute to building up a very much needed shared public space, where Europe could reinvent itself arising out of the 'heroism of reason'– to remember the philosopher Edmund Husserl who in 1935 (another period of crisis for Europe) asked the same question: 'what does Europe represent today?'

His reply was that either Europe would fall by becoming spiritually alienated from its own meaning (what he saw as a collapse into hatred and barbarism) or Europe could undergo a spiritual rebirth out of a 'the heroism of reason'.

Culture can bring this 'heroism of reason' in Europe today. Culture can bring a vision for the future.

Culture can inspire the creative potential of our citizens, our entrepreneurs, and our young people. We need this. We need to find innovative solutions to societal and economic challenges. We need social and territorial cohesion, where each region and city can develop its strengths. We need quality jobs and skilled and flexible human capital.

Culture – as a public value and as a sector of economic activity – can have an impact on these issues.

We are embarking on a reflection process about Europe - which is much needed. Culture cannot provide all the answers, but can certainly raise questions. I am sure the New Narrative initiative will rightly do that. It is of course our shared responsibility to go beyond rhetoric and ensure the means for our joint action for Europe.