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OLD AND YOUNG EUROPE: A LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL WORLD.

When we hear the word 'Europe', we inevitably look back and think about the eternal story of the old continent. A story that goes beyond any geographical boundaries; hence it's other appropriate name: the Old World. Because that's what Europe is: a World. Worlds cross borders between countries, they can never be identified and registered in Customs Offices. Worlds are composed of ideas, beliefs and hopes, but they become shared democracies, religions and life plans respectively. This is what Europe was, is and must remain. However, its eternal story will result in an eternal nothing if we, especially young Europeans, fail to do everything possible to make that world habitable and viable. And I wonder: what can we, the young people, do? How can we make the past viable? In short, how can we build Europe? It is impossible to answer this question in only a few lines, but I will try to contribute something. A proposal. This is a proposal with limitations, it is not claiming to be the only one, just one of many. However, I think it is key, and I think it is necessary, for the aim we are pursuing: without it, the rest is not possible. I am referring to the importance of languages and language learning for the Europe that we want to build.

The philosopher L. Wittgenstein's famous quote is very apt here: "*Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt*", which can be translated as "the boundaries of my language signify the boundaries of my world". It is probably not the most beautiful of translations, but it is the most appropriate, as it accurately describes the situation in Europe today. It is a paradoxical situation: we have demolished the heavy physical boundaries that once divided Europe and have forgotten about the lighter ones: the invisible boundaries. Clearly, there is free movement of capital in Europe and beyond. The European Common Market and the single currency is undoubtedly a major achievement. The economy is an essential cornerstone of any society, but it is nothing without its people. Therefore we must ensure that it is not only capital but also people who can move freely, and not just move, but also live, work, and study; in short we must ensure that people can inhabit and coexist in the different countries and cultures that constitute the European Union, and so it is essential that the various languages spoken in the European region be taught and learnt. Otherwise, the European region will simply be a common area of trade and movement of people, but never a world that can be shared and is up to standard. Because languages are not just languages. A language is not just a means of communication: it is, above all, a world. It expresses and brings together cultural traditions via concepts, words, sayings and expressions. Language learning is the only way to enable people to communication and integrate into different societies and cultures.

We are not content with free movement: we want a Europe in which people can live together. Moving is easy, fast and cheap. Luckily, we have low-cost flights that allow us to travel throughout Europe in only a few hours. After completing my undergraduate Philosophy studies in Spain, I packed my suitcase and bought one of those tickets myself, in order to work and study abroad.



The reason I was able to do this is because I had spent one year in Germany under the Erasmus programme, I had used my summer holidays to work and learn languages, and I had done this in other countries as well as in Spain, at the Escuela Oficial de Idiomas (Official Language School). When I landed far from Spanish shores almost two years ago now, there were people who literally opened up the doors of their homes to me. They helped me because I could communicate with them, and I was able to help them, too. I found work in the food industry, I learned a trade and I met people from Switzerland, Portugal, Egypt, Italy, Turkey, France, Tunisia, Germany and France. I made great friends and I started to learn French (I now live in Saint-Louis, France).

However, in all that time I never stopped teaching my mother tongue to anyone who wanted to learn it, as I have always been convinced of the importance of languages. Now I am a part-time Spanish teacher at a language school, which allows me to further my studies in my other big passion, philosophy. My mother also packed her own suitcase and came to find work with me and is now living here. But that's another story.

Now, when I look back, I see a long story, as long as that of the Old World we call Europe. I feel fortunate to be able to inhabit that world and coexist with the people who live in it. All of this because I learned one of its languages. Thanks to this, the invisible borders became more invisible; the economic crisis became less of a crisis; I learned and experienced what would otherwise have been impossible; and, with work and effort, my plans are gradually coming to fruition. My story is just one of the stories of the thousands and thousands of young people who also bought a cheap flight and could be writing this article today.

For all of these reasons I conclude with a concrete proposal for a real and effective commitment to compulsory language teaching and learning throughout Europe: from school curriculums to university courses. Languages cannot remain optional, they must be mandatory cross-curricular subjects. The teaching and learning of languages must become a top priority for European institutions at every level, both nationally and internationally; their development must be encouraged, promoted and sustained. This applies to all official languages, for both students and teachers.

For our part, our commitment and obligation will be concerned with the ability to work, international mobility and effort. I believe that this is what we, the young people of Europe, can and should do.