



ODYSSEUS

**A EUROPEAN CIVIC SERVICE
FOR THE REINVENTION OF EUROPE**

Volta

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"An Erasmus for taxi-drivers,
plumbers and other workers"

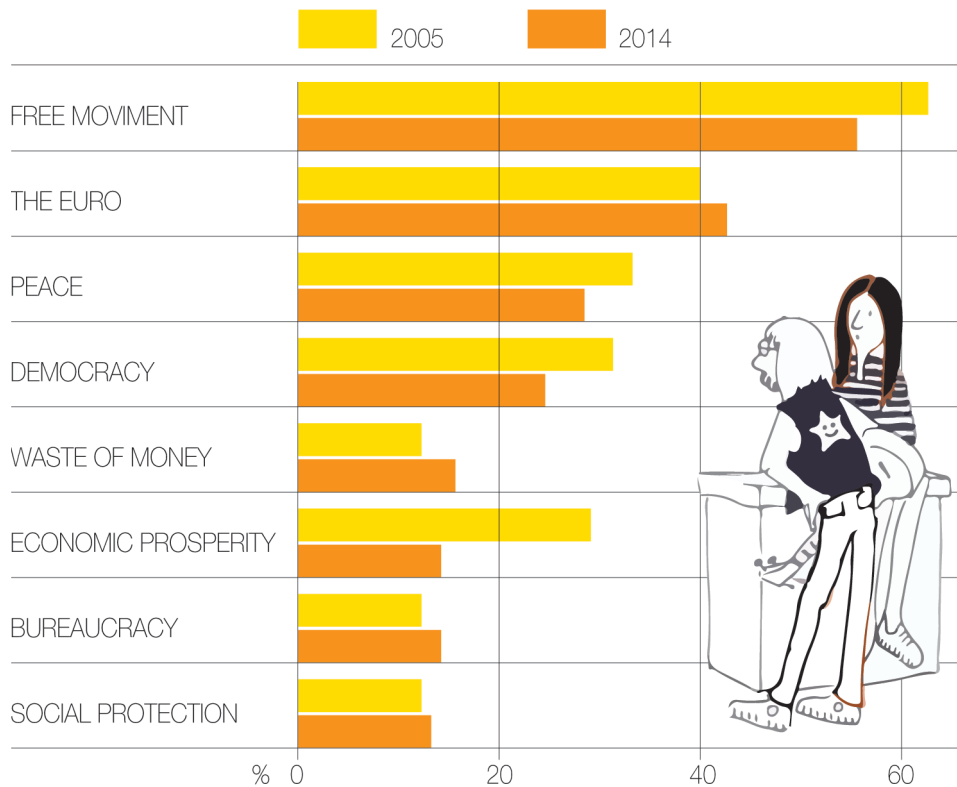
UMBERTO ECO

Introduction

Odysseus is not yet another bureaucratic program. It's an attempt to reinvent the European identity starting with the simplest of questions: what does Europe have to say to an 18 year old today? And, most importantly, is it possible to leverage the energy of our new generations to re-boot the European project, considering that throughout the continent young people are among the main supporters of the recent eurosceptic movements?

WHAT THE EU MEANS TO YOUNG PEOPLE

(15 to 24 years olds)



Source: Eurobarometer

At Volta we believe that Europe has not yet tapped into the curiosity, the sense of adventure and the legitimate desire of the young to find their own place in the world.

This is why we propose a voluntary European Civic Service designed for all of its 18-25 years olds, offering them a chance to experience a period that can last between six months to a year in a European country that isn't their own.

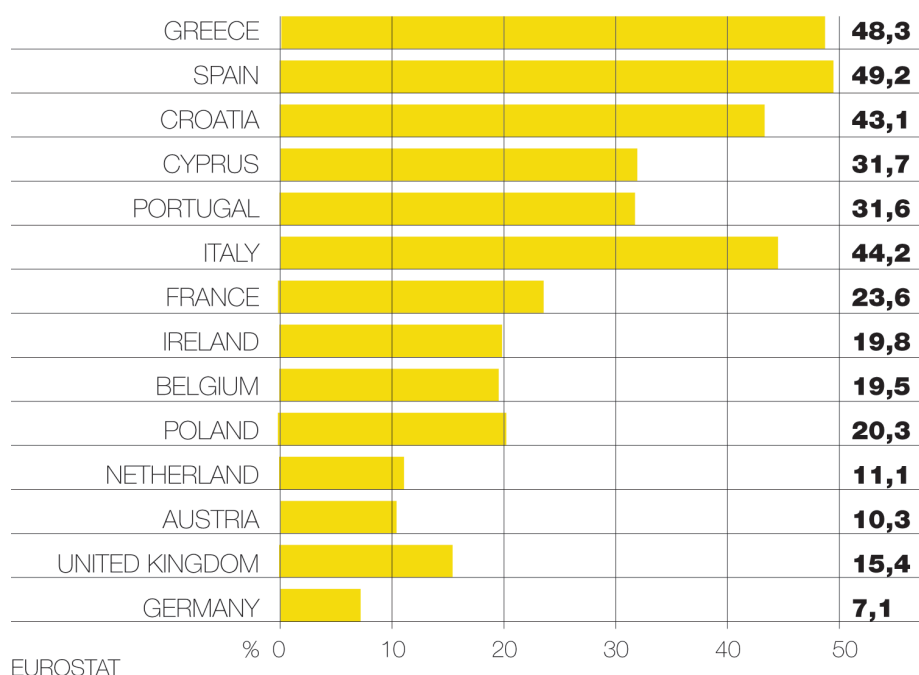
In order to imagine what the Odysseus experience might look and feel like, Volta has assembled an eclectic mix of people from the non-profit sector, from the worlds of academia, media, business and politics: Anna Ascani is a young MP from the Democratic Party, who was recently included on the "European 30 under 30" list by Forbes Magazine; Francesco Clementi professor of comparative constitutional law at Perugia University; Luca De Biase is the editor of Nova, the innovation technology weekly of "Il Sole 24 Ore"; Filippo Gavazzeni is the founder of Milano Fuoriclasse, an NGO focused on reviving the civic sense in young people; Federico Sarica is the editor in chief of Studio Magazine and a founding member of Volta. This proposal is the result of their work and it will be followed by several thematic sessions as well as a European-wide consultation over the next few months.

The limits of the Easyjet-set

Today, the younger generations are at the heart of the European question. On the one hand, they have been the most affected by the crisis. While the average income for 16-24 year olds at the beginning of the millennium was growing faster than that of any other age group, the situation has now reversed. On a continental scale, the unemployment rate for under 25's remains above 20% with peaks that go far above that number, sometimes doubling it in countries such as Greece and Spain.

Over the past few months, however, the European Union's crisis has hit the young on a different front, which is perhaps even more crucial than the purely economical one.

UNDER 25 UNEMPLOYMENT IN EUROPE (June 2015)



Europe means different things to different generations.

For the older generations, Europe was an antidote to war: the instrument developed by the continental ruling classes in order to put an end to the fratricidal rivalry that shed its blood all over Europe for centuries until the catastrophe of the Second World War.

For the middle generations, Europe has a prevailing economic connotation. It has been a vehicle for prosperity: from the harmonization of rules and the integration of markets one expected economical growth and expansion in return as well as protection from turbulence on a global level.

For the younger generations, it is an entirely different story. When asked what Europe means to them, 57% of the respondents in the 15-24 year old range identified it with freedom of movement. Far more than the ones that mentioned peace. Or the Euro.

For the young, mobility isn't one of Europe's many aspects. It is Europe. The freedom of moving easily across frontiers in order to travel, study or work is the essence of the European experience, its most profound meaning. Some have defined it the "Erasmus generation". Others, with more fantasy, coined the expression: The Easyjet-set.

Today, the migrant crisis is putting this freedom at risk. If, for the older generation, this is just an unpleasant return to the past, for the Easyjet-set it is the end of one world and the beginning of an unknown and threatening dimension made up of borders, limits and heightened supervision. The end of the Europe they once knew.

Paradoxically, this regression is being produced with the deci-

sive support of a growing number of young voters. Throughout the continent, disaffected young people have become the backbone of populist and eurosceptic movements. In Greece, Golden Dawn is now supported by 13,3% of the under 25, more than double its score among the general population. In Hungary, a fifth of the electorate between 18 and 33 supports the ultra-nationalist party Jobbik.

Even in countries that have until now largely been spared by the crisis, the most extreme formations are catalysing the support of the young. In Germany, the right-wing populist upstart AfD has registered percentages far higher than average among the under 30 year olds. The same is true for other xenophobic, eurosceptic groups in the Netherlands and across Scandinavia.

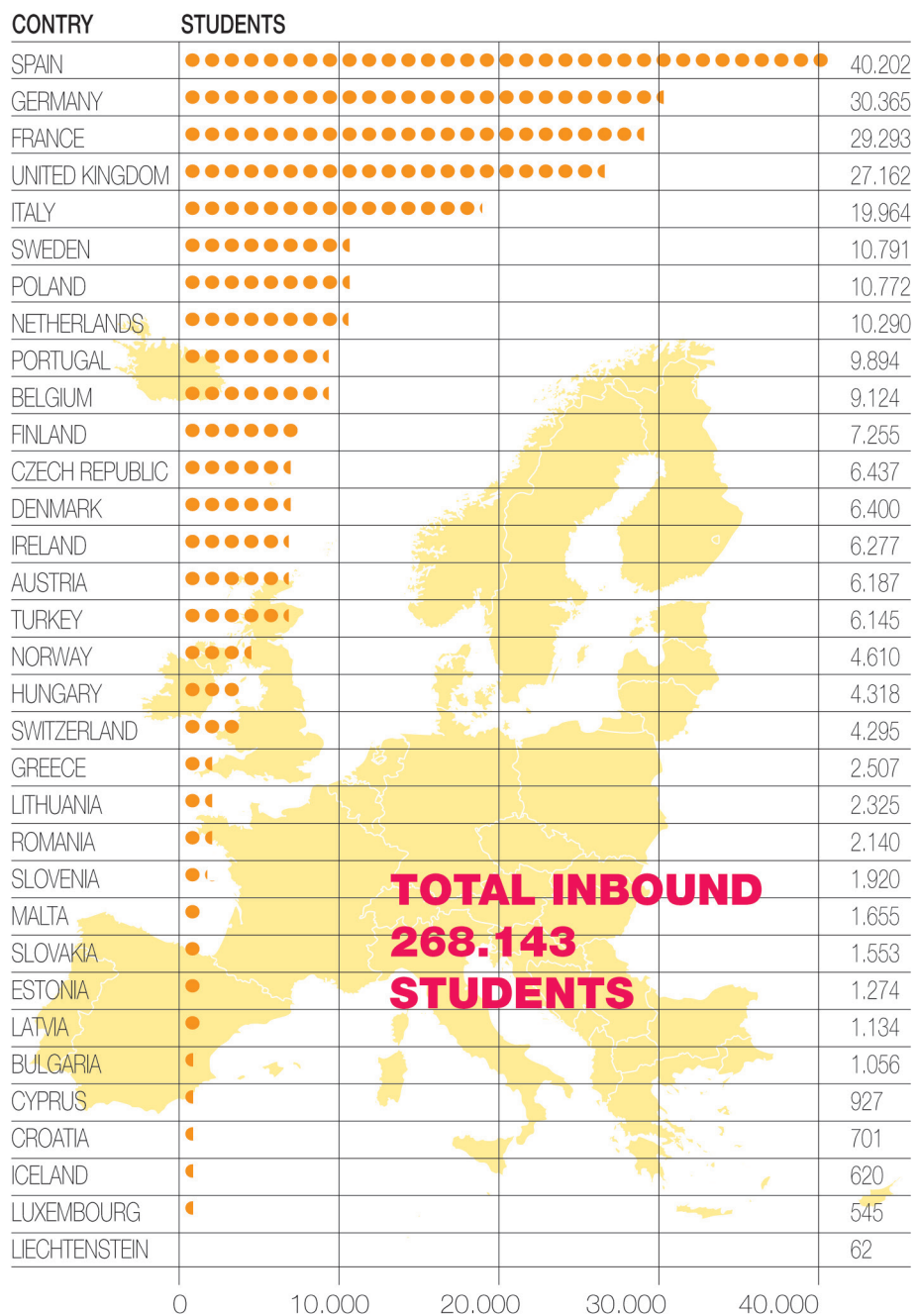
This data is in sharp contrast with the Easyjet-set rhetoric. It tells us that, as much as openness and mobility have become part of the younger generation's DNA, they are still limited to a privileged socio-economic group.

A segment which has all the instruments, material as well as cultural, to take full advantage of the opportunities for mobility that Europe offers on different levels: from the institutional dimension of the Erasmus program to the commercial realm of low cost flights.

As democratic as it may seem, when compared to the past, the Easyjet-set remains an exclusive world. It is also a fragile one. At a time of mounting tensions, it risks total annihilation, behind the new walls that are springing up along its once open borders.

MOST POPULAR ERASMUS DESTINATIONS

2012/2013



After Erasmus, Odysseus

A few years ago, Umberto Eco described the need for “an Erasmus for taxi drivers, plumbers and builders”.

The Erasmus program has indeed been one of the few EU programs capable of producing a deep cultural transformation, sowing the seeds of a truly European generation.

While offering university students the possibility of spending part of their academic programs abroad, Erasmus was built on the intuition that European citizenship is born of experience; that one isn't born European, but becomes European. That there is no better way to feel a part of the European project than having a European experience, by spending a period of study abroad.

The impact of the Erasmus program has, however, remained the advantage of a limited group of young people who were already predisposed to international contact due to their privileged backgrounds and education.

The attempts to widen the range of beneficiaries, such as Erasmus+, did produce some positive effects, but within limits. They have not successfully penetrated the collective imagination of young Europeans yet. Nor have they been able to significantly alter their perception of the opportunities at hand.

In 2012, a manifesto in favour of “one year of European civic service open to all” was launched by the sociologist Ulrich Beck and the MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit. They collected the signatures of hundreds of Europe's leading figures from the political and cultural sectors, from Jacques Delors to Rem Koolhaas, various

Nobel prize winners, as well as the president of the European Parliament.

From then on, various experiments and initiatives have been launched, one after the other, and among them, the International Volunteering Opportunities for All (IVO 4 ALL), which was initiated during the semester of the Italian presidency of the European Union.

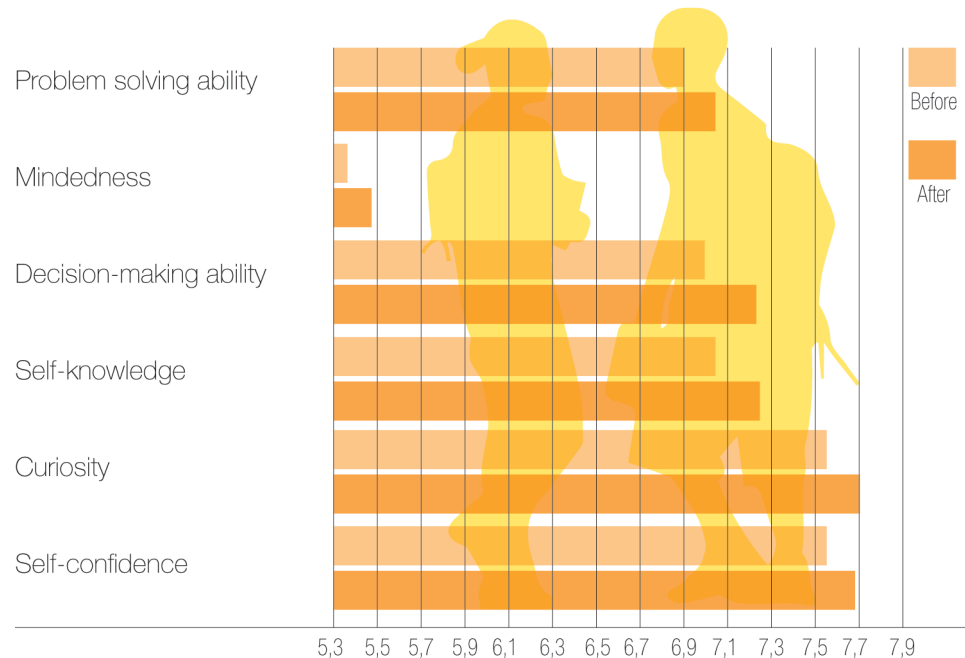


These experiences have all been useful, but they haven't gone far enough.

We believe that the way forward would be the creation of a voluntary European Civic Service, open to all 18-25 year olds. It would be a chance for all young Europeans (not just students), to spend between 6 months to 1 year in a European country of their choice, within which they could gain meaningful, hands-on work experience in the social, cultural or environmental sectors. An opportunity for all young people, not just those who are already engaged in the voluntary sector, to improve the world in which they live, as well as establish themselves within society.

Volta chose the Greek name **Odysseus** for this project. Not because it's particularly original (it isn't), but because it signals the level of ambition we believe a program like this one should have. While the Erasmus program was born in 1987, inspired by one of the greatest humanists in European history, **Odysseus** refers to the character, which, more than any other, has incarnated curiosity and adventure. It symbolizes the voyage of discovery of "the other", of the unknown that causes fear until it is confronted and finally "known".

SKILLS ACQUIRED AFTER ERASMUS



Volta believes that Europe needs to be able to awaken the deeper passions of its younger generations, if it wants to become something more than the mere sum of its regulations.

Odysseus' objectives

First and foremost, **Odysseus** should be an answer to the desire, common to most young people, to be acknowledged as a part of society, to find a role, and if possible, leave their mark.

From 18th century novels to 21st century reality TV shows, the same need manifests itself from generation to generation, without changing its underlying nature. Youth is a moment of individuation, the moment in time in which we look most intensely for a role model to follow, as well as experiences to help form our own personalities, to find out who we really are, to draw the contours of our own identities. It is a confusing but generous phase in our lives that is as vulnerable as it is full of potential.

A time that is capable of bringing out the best as well as the worst in every individual. When analysing Isis propaganda, the French philosopher of language Philippe-Joseph Salazar discovered that to attract young Europeans the Islamic State adopts an elevated language that appeals to their values, their sense of nobility and moral elevation. “The thousands of young French people - because among all of the contingents they are the most numerous - who travel to Syria, exposing themselves to death in the name of their new faith, want to live in a more elevated way. To them, the République seems base and the language it uses, vile. These young people are our lost generation.”

Odysseus does not dream of becoming an alternative to extremism. But it does wish to transmit a message that is noble and elevated to all young Europeans. An appeal to their natural generosity, to their ability to commit to a job, to their desire to make a difference. Changing the world – or at least Europe – is possible.

And voluntary work in the social, environmental and cultural fields is a chance for everyone to play a meaningful role.

Odysseus should also be an invitation to discovery and exploration: to broadening one's sense of "home". Home is a place where we have a role, a place where we feel safe because it has a strong sense of cultural values, it is a place where we know what to expect, it is a place we are familiar with. How can we feel at home in Europe if we have never been beyond the borders of our own country? In many cases, our own city? This is the unfortunate reality of many of Europe's youths today.

Offering all young Europeans, not just those who belong to the Easyjet-set, the opportunity to confront different countries and cultures, to be immersed in contexts which may not be necessarily familiar in order to re-emerge transformed, enriched by an experience destined to change one's perspective forever. Multiplying one's opportunities and prospective, throwing down old walls and even some new ones that are being rebuilt in the heart of Europe. This would be another great benefit of partaking in a genuine European Civil Service.

Finally, Odysseus would be a significant step on the path to future employment, providing each participant with a wealth of experience and a set of skills that can be useful at a later stage. An **Odysseus** volunteer will work directly with the community in which he is inserted, acquiring competitive advantages in his field, with international and intracultural experience. Far from being limited to providing participants with a gratifying experience of service, the program's goal will be to give them a head-start which will have a positive impact on their future employment prospects, as has been the case with Erasmus.

This being said, **Odysseus** should not be seen solely from the

perspective of its participants. It is different from programs like Erasmus, because when one speaks of civic service, one isn't referring to measures taken for the sole benefit of the young, but to activities that produce positive effects on society as a whole.

Whether it is the integration of migrants or a program to assist the elderly, the promotion of culture and the protection of the environment, youth volunteering projects are already the backbones of so many initiatives in the non-profit sector. It isn't difficult to imagine what the positive effects would be if they were multiplied on a larger scale, which is what **Odysseus** plans to do.



Imagine hundreds of thousands of young people trained and ready to confront the multiple emergencies that European society is faced with every single day. From the most visible ones – such as the influx of migrants – to the ones that are hidden from view – such as the loneliness that so many elderly people experience throughout our cities.

Odysseus will be a powerful injection of energy for European society as a whole.

Odysseus' main features

It might be a bit early to delve into the details of a proposal like **Odysseus**, which is bound to go through several transformations before it actually comes into being. This said, it is already possible to indicate some features that **Odysseus**, or any proposal of this kind, should possess in order to produce a real lasting impact:

● STARTING FROM WHAT ALREADY EXISTS

Several forms of “European” civic service are already available. Whether it is the “Service Civil International” (an NGO present in 43 countries throughout the world, which has been promoting international volunteering projects for over 90 years), or the European Voluntary Service (a program funded by the European Commission which gives young people the opportunity to express their personal commitment through full-time voluntary work in a foreign country within or outside the EU).

In addition to that, we have already mentioned “IVO 4 ALL”, a pilot program based on the partnership of several member States (at the moment: France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Luxemburg and Lithuania), aimed at fostering exchanges and the reciprocal recognition of acquired experience in the field of voluntary work to increase levels of employability.



These are all very significant experiences, which should be taken into full account when designing Odysseus.

● **REACHING BEYOND TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION AND BILATERAL AGREEMENTS IN ORDER TO CREATE A GENUINE EUROPEAN CIVIC SERVICE.**

In spite of several positive examples, there is still considerable room for improvement. What Europe needs now is a truly universal Civic Service program, whose objective would no longer be to simply involve participants in projects designed by NGOs, on a case by case basis, but to direct a call to all young Europeans to engage in a period of service, aimed at fostering a sense of common belonging and common purpose.

The main difference between **Odysseus** and the other existing programs is clear: it is about going beyond mere transnational cooperation between NGO's, as well as bilateral or multilateral agreements between member States, to create a genuine European Civic Service, aimed at the Union's entire community, based on a stable institutional framework within which member states can cooperate.

● **CREATING A EUROPEAN NETWORK OF NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

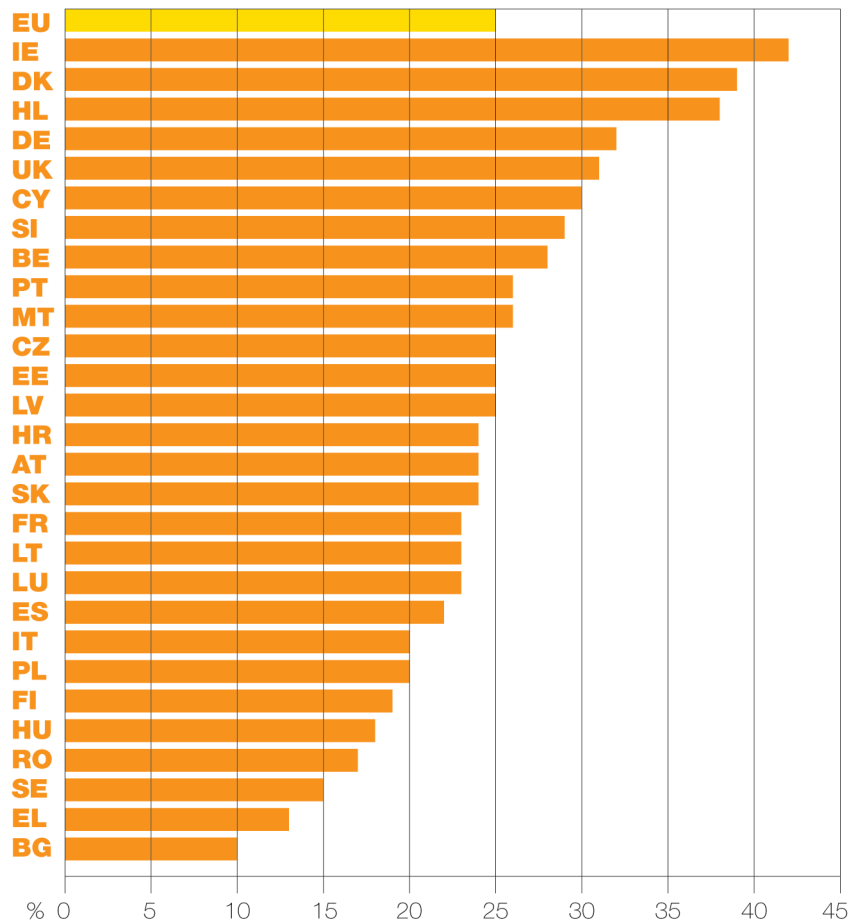
In order for this to become a reality, there would obviously be a need for strict program coordination at a EU level, but national institutions should retain a key role as intermediaries.

A real European civic service should involve the competent na-

tional ministries, which would function as certifying entities; would be in charge of the overall NGO coordination and simultaneously take care of the recruitment of young participants.

This institutional network, besides offering a guarantee to all of the parties involved, would allow for increased inter-ministerial cooperation, fostering the development of a truly European dimension in this crucial field.

PARTECIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN ORGANISED VOLUNTARY ACTIVITIES BY COUNTRY, 2014



Source: Flash Eurobarometer 408, "European Youth, 2014"

● PROVIDING AN EXPERIENCE OPEN TO ALL

Universal access is the defining feature of the **Odysseus** proposal. It is based on the idea that everyone can contribute in a meaningful way to the wellbeing of a community, independently from the possession of any specific set of skill. It is specifically geared at breaking the exclusive mould of the Easyjet-set, allowing young people from all socioeconomic backgrounds to take part in a truly European experience.

This is why it is absolutely necessary that participants receive a grant for the duration of the project, one that covers travel, as well as board and lodging expenses entirely. This grant should be co-financed by the EU (around 70%) and national administrations.

● THINKING OF THE BEFORE AND AFTER

Like any important journey, **Odysseus** should begin well before the set departure and end well after its return, if it ends at all...

The program will begin with a short training-camp, organized by the Union in collaboration with national administrations and NGOs. This will be the time to provide language training, as well as a specific training in line with the chosen field of service.

Upon completion of this initial training period in their own country, the young people would then travel to another country within the European Union, with their procedures and their objectives clearly set beforehand, constantly monitored by the competent administration of the host country.

After completion of the Civic Service, **Odysseus** would provide each participant with a certificate that will be a recognition tool for the skills they have acquired on their journey. Youthpass, a European recognition tool for non-formal and informal learning in voluntary work is a good starting point to envisage a more articulate system of incentives for both participants and employers that would turn an **Odysseus** experience into a significant competitive advantage in the jobs market.



● KEEPING IN MIND WHAT IS ESSENTIAL (+ COOL)

Any initiative aimed at young people has to have these two qualities: it has to be known, advertised, talked about, easily understood. And, last but not least, be “cool” ... That is how the Erasmus Generation has come to be proud of its name, it has created a feeling of belonging, as well as a sense of exclusivity, by acquiring a series of useful contacts, a European network, as well as

having learned a foreign language, seen or rather experienced a different part of Europe and - the ultimate goal – felt at home there.

Generation Y defines itself via its new communication codes and platforms that are quite different from the ones that came before. Attempting to communicate with them without mastering these would be foolish. This is where an ambitious project like **Odysseus** comes into play. An ad-hoc communication strategy will be necessary and will be explored more profoundly in Volta's next focus group.

Conclusion

This last point brings us back to the beginning. It's not just a matter of communication: in order to produce a real impact on the continent's current identity crisis, a European Civic Service cannot be the brainchild of a purely bureaucratic process. It needs to stem from a broad cultural debate that goes back to the very essence of our shared values.



Our goal is to insert this topic into the European agenda, as a powerful antidote to the growing distrust that is taking root within EU countries and within European institutions. For this to happen, an open discussion needs to take place. Not about technicalities, but about fundamentals. What does Europe have to say to an 18 year old today? And what, if anything, does an 18 year old expect from Europe?

What would the European dream be if Europeans dared to dream?

Over the next few months, Volta will launch several initiatives to promote this discussion across Europe, involving a wide range of protagonists, from senior political figures to NGO leaders, dynamic cultural networks and young social entrepreneurs.

Stay up to date and participate in the project by logging on to www.voltaitalia.org.

 **Volta**

