

European societies and the European ideals are facing an existential threat. Looking for solutions like a new framing or better communication is not enough. New capabilities and a revived European identity must be deployed in response, possibly within a single, organic vision. This vision has to address young Europeans and must be able to leave a positive impact on their biographies. It has to be brave and bold in taking care of their “[capacitation](#)” and “[socialisation](#)”; it has to enable them as citizens of a dynamic, diverse and integrated transnational society. The following discusses why I believe the introduction of an EU-wide compulsory civilian service is a major opportunity to address these fateful questions.

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Young Europeans manifest an explosive mix of optimism and fear. Unemployed and denied of autonomy in their employment and fertility choices, young Europeans see, just like their parents, globalisation transforming their urban and rural landscapes, not always for the better. But so much more of their parents, they are exposed to the threats of the new millennium: uncontrolled migration, lack of personal security and privacy, terrorist strikes in the airports and concert halls of their homeland Europe. Most of this exposure is not due to free choice, but to the expectations society sets for their patterns of behaviour and consumption.

Young Europeans have been [the hardest-hit by the crisis](#). Questions of [intergenerational equality and fairness](#) are disregarded in almost all EU member states. The “[European youth in 2016](#)” Eurobarometer survey shows that a majority of young Europeans feel the crisis marginalised and excluded from economic and social life. One out of six on average feels compelled to leave their country. Little more than one in ten European below the age of 30 has travelled to another member state to study or work.

[European youngsters remain more optimistic](#) than other generations about the role of technology and information in modern society, as well as about the mission of the EU. Independent research suggests that trust in Europe and the feeling of being “master of their own destiny” and of having “a chance to show what they’re really capable of” all are strong correlates of such an optimism. Nonetheless, many young Europeans are scared of discrimination, war and not being able to create their own family.

Optimism and fear form an unstable compound, which risks fuelling the populist propaganda machine. At every election, new cohorts of citizens rightfully gain voice in the national and supranational electoral process. They have the power to tilt a longstanding balance among popular and socialist forces. But they can also choose, and get socialised to, a different alternative. Environmentalism was the case for “[Generation X](#)”. [Exclusionary populism](#) is what is on the menu now. Youngsters may not be the warmest supporters of parties like the UKIP, but their disillusionment and low mobilisation potential has already tilted the balance in favour of [Brexit](#). The enormous economic, political and diplomatic costs of their disenfranchisement are now for all to see. But there is more at stake.

Economic and political alienation compounds to a feeling of powerlessness and exclusion: the feeling of being a surplus generation in a deficit nation. In Germany, France and Italy, the youngest voter cohorts [disproportionally support Eurosceptic populist parties](#) such as *Alternative für Deutschland*, the *Front National* and the Five Star Movement. Generational replacement within the electorate is known to bring new values and new issues to the fore ([see Franklin and Riera](#)). The more young Europeans get socialised into supporting fear-mongering electoral platforms, the greatest the lost potential for much needed civic loyalty and solidarity. All this risks swelling the sails of populism, announcing the return of illiberal temptations and ethno-nationalist self-closure, of fear and distrust among the peoples of Europe. If it is not to lose its soul, Europe should take action and prevent its youngest cohorts from being socialised to ethno-nationalism and bigotry.

Civism and solidarity

As French MEP Sylvie Goulard [recently put it](#):

Europe is the best place in the world to live, particularly for the young and even more particularly for girls. It is a place where we enjoy rights without even thinking about them.

Beyond the intention of the speaker, the passage is revealing of an existential threat to the social ethic of EU citizens, especially of those who feel excluded. As Rainer Bauböck made clear in his 2017 [State of the Union Address](#): “duty-free citizenship does not support a sense of solidarity and it makes citizens less keen to hold governments accountable.” Voluntary participation is politically unfit to support the degree of social solidarity and the popular mandate that alone can provide EU citizens with the levels of social rights they got accustomed to.

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Europeans pay tax money to their countries, which then contribute a tiny part of it to the EU. Programmes and initiatives financed with this money remain, like the [Erasmus+](#), the preserve of a minority of EU citizens, or otherwise give Europe little merit for what is gained at the national or sub-national level. Whereas, even among those who voluntarily move to study and work across Europe, [a sentiment prevails of having been ousted from their own country](#).

For young unemployed still living in their parents' household, denied of the opportunity to earn a living income and creating a family without leaving their country for good, voluntary exchange programmes are not a solution. Some would feel this experience will not change their life, that it will be a caprice and a waste of time. Some are simply unable to see themselves studying or working in another language and in a different cultural context. Some would be discouraged by the competition, some by their own family and friends. Some, as of today, may just not be willing to support the strong federalist underpinning of such initiatives. All this makes them unable to take advantage of their right to mobility and cultural exchange. Once young people are put in a similar position, one must understand that [nativism](#) risks becoming a powerful self-justifying mindset.

But even a unified European tax system will not work for the young unemployed, for the

young unskilled or destitute who have little tax money and tons of time spent in distress. So we now see a u-turn in states like [Sweden and Lithuania](#), which are reintroducing compulsory drafting for young males. Is this the first step towards a [European Army](#)? Hardly. It rather seems a backward-looking patch to youth unemployment and to the needs of national polities. Any return to nationalism and militarism, to [a nationalisation of the masses](#), entails the risk of displacing the emergence of a European identity. It risks strengthening the citizens' sense of insecurity and loss of control, rather than responding to them. Here is the problem nexus where Europe needs to step in.

Reality and vision

The first stone of a European civilian service might already have been laid. Since December 2016, the [European Solidarity Corps initiative](#) offers young people aged between 18 and 30 opportunities for volunteering and professional development in solidarity-related activities for two to twelve months, across and outside the EU. The initiative welcomes a wide range of stakeholders under a partnership arrangement, including public bodies, NGOs and business organisations. Volunteers will be reimbursed for the costs they face, while workers and trainees will be paid according to an employment contract framework. This is an encouraging first step. However, it fails to tackle some of the criticalities outlined above.

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Today's Solidarity Corps still is a voluntary exercise, tailored to the cosmopolitan elite and far from a clear framework of citizenship rights and obligations. It does not even constitute an alternative to national conscription (or national civilian service) in Member States where this is still compulsory. Moreover, members of the European Solidarity Corps are [selected to be employed](#). As they can be selected in, they can be selected out. Matters of citizenship and civism, however, require a different, more inclusive, approach. While meritocracy is important for the future of the EU, nobody – optimist or afraid, rich or poor, educated or unskilled – should be denied the opportunity to do something good for the needy, the

destitute or the environment. This implies that a civilian service developed from the experience of the Solidarity Corps should focus on training and on mobility across Member States, tailoring the former so as to enable the latter.

The preservation of the environment and of [European artistic heritage](#) should become the primary driver of a European sense of identity, belonging and purpose. The external dimension of citizenship should not be forgotten and this means that agencies such as [Frontex also need to be involved](#). This bears an even more delicate question. A voluntary option for military training, unrestricted on gender basis and alternative to any military draft or similar obligations at the national level, would empower this framework, building a strong and realistic synergy with EU border patrol activities.

With the passing of time, and possibly as a self-financed and self-managed activity, the programme should establish its own campuses, treated as EU territories within the host country. Participants should be clearly informed about existing opportunities to refine and upgrade the skills and professional capabilities they have developed during their period of service. Universities, chambers of commerce, private and no-profit actors as well as public administrations all over Europe should compete for the talents and aspirations of young Europeans who fulfilled with merit and profit their civilian service duties.

A final word

A compulsory European civilian service may be the first pillar of a new European identity: one able to play a progressive and pro-active role in the turbulent global scenario of the 21st century. Above are some sketchy suggestions on what it may look like. Not everything that can be imagined can be achieved, and certainly not at once. What is important, however, is not losing the underlying vision: the dream of a European Union able to socialise young people to a truly European citizenship. Citizenship entails both duties and rights, but in no case should it select individuals on the basis of their skills or attitudes. It should offer a different idea of [social relationship](#) than market participation or voluntary associationalism.

Before it can truly become a polity, the EU needs to actualise itself as a community of cooperation and goodwill. A Union bold enough to give value to the young generations and provides them with meaning, opportunities and capabilities. A Union brave enough to say aloud that no Europe is possible without the energy and commitment of youth. This can only obtain [until the political centre holds](#) against the lengthening shades of nativism and xenophobia. The clock is ticking.

A compulsory civilian service to promote the European identity
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