

Education is Key

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Culture does not know manmade borders. It has been “European” long before the “European integration” started after the Second World War with the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952. Whoever has the possibility to travel overseas can easily recognize from the distance that — despite all its diversity — Europe has a common cultural fundament and has a way of living that can serve as a basis for political unification.

However, not everyone has the opportunity to travel to other continents, and artists and scientists, while being great multipliers, are not the majority of the population. So, how can we raise awareness for the common European cultural and scientific heritage and thus strengthen the European identity of citizens? The cultural sector can play a big role itself, by making Europe a topic in literature, music and visual arts and not least by initiatives like “A Soul for Europe”. The European institutions should support cross-border cooperation of artists as well as cultural events and festivities. Yet all these measures will fall short, if there is no paradigm shift in national education policies.

In contrast to the majority of people, national politics historically perceive and use culture as a source of national pride and identity. This is also reflected in the curricula in schools and universities. Often, culture and education are under the responsibility of the same ministry in national and regional governments. Students learn about the great achievements of their compatriots, while the greater picture and the fact that many of those achievements could only take place in a pan-European cultural space are largely ignored. There is nothing wrong in teaching national history. We all live in communities and we want to know how our home-city was founded or which famous inventors, artists or statesmen were born in our region or country. A problem exists, however, when cultural achievements are used to differentiate one people or country from another and in the worst case to prove the own (perceived) supremacy. Sometimes, the nationalities of historic personalities are even disputed. Instead, the potential of culture as a uniting factor should be used by widening the scope of the curricula.

Education and culture policies are national (or in federal states regional) competences and there is no reason to change that. However, if the many speeches about our common European values, history and destiny are more than lip services — should students not learn about them? In school you hear about Europe in the context of war and conflict and at best — in a purely technical manner — in politics class, when students are confronted with the functioning of the EU’s political system. While it is important to know how the system works, being able to name the EU institutions is hardly enough to form an emotional bond

with Europe and to define oneself as part of a European community of citizens based on common values and solidarity.

To win the hearts of the young generation — and therefore Europe's future — a common educational basis is indispensable. The governments of the Member States, represented by the ministers responsible for education and culture, should draft a pan-European curriculum, which would complement the national and regional curricula. Focusing on what unites us, European achievements in arts, social and human rights, society and science should be taught as well as the implications of historic events in the wider European context. This could be done by establishing a new subject of "European studies", entailing all of the mentioned aspects from culture to politics. Alternatively, the content could be incorporated horizontally in existing subjects like arts, literature, history and social science. "Education is key" — not only for everyone's personal future, but as well for the future of Europe.