

Citizens' for Reunited Europe Paper

The rEUnite project has taken place amidst unprecedented times within Europe and beyond, from the global COVID-19 pandemic to a war and refugee crisis. In that sense, the project has been particularly timely, by providing a space and opportunity for members to reflect on recent history and current events facing Europe, and how recurring and new challenges could be addressed collectively.

The project has enabled citizens - and particularly young people - to connect and communicate about individual and shared experiences in European countries. This paper aims to provide a cohesive summary of the rEUnite project, by 1) comparing the different national points of view that were documented and shared at various international meetings, and 2) drawing some common lessons for the future at EU level. This summary can be circulated to EU institutions and MEPs, in an effort to shape the strategic agenda for the near future of Europe.

Conclusions from Bulgaria: totalitarianism, democracy and youth

The first event of the project took place in Bulgaria, in June 2021. The overarching theme of the event was the experience of Bulgarian citizens whilst under a totalitarian regime, and how this has impacted the present day. The aim of the event was to join international participants with the local researchers and a youth group in Veliko Tărnovo, to discuss the “closed” and “open society” funding and the role of the civic actors and agents during the totalitarian regimes.

To do so, the event consisted of visits to historical sites that served as remnants of this past. These included: the Oblast Government Hall, which during the communist time was a place of the Oblast Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party; a museum of socialist equipment in the town of Kilifarevo; the area of Arbanassi, to visit the District Residence of the communist leader Todor Zhivkov - which is now a 5 star hotel and a UNESCO heritage site Nativity church.

Throughout the visits, participants were encouraged to take part in story telling, debates and workshop sessions to reflect on what the sites used to be, the lived experience (and difficulties), and the differences of what they are now. Attendees were made up of 55 young people, all eager to learn more from the Bulgarian people and share experiences.

A key takeaway from this meeting was the importance of democracy that the EU brought to the citizens of Bulgaria. This has played out through civic participation, but also through a democratic way of living - rights such as being able to communicate, share, and protest. Contrasting this with

the experiences of totalitarian regimes and some ongoing challenges today led participants to make the following recommendations:

Recommendations:

- **It must be a priority to protect and build on the levels of citizen participation that European democracy introduced.**
- **(Political) education and raising awareness among the youngest population should be prioritised over attempting to change voting ages or making voting obligatory.**
- **Member states should adopt policies for overcoming the lack of connection between education and entering the job market.** Rarely do the existing education systems provide young people with skills useful in future work; the European Union should introduce programs and training that connect school, universities with workplaces and encourage the new youth culture of entrepreneurship.

Conclusions from Greece: civic participation and fundamental rights following Covid-19?

The project’s second event was held in Serres, Greece, in September 2021. The overarching theme of the event was the intersection between the Covid-19 pandemic and Fundamental Rights in the European Union.

Titled “The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on safeguarding Fundamental Rights – constraints and adjustments for the protection of Fundamental Rights”, the event drew on EU legislation, institutional documentation and the lived experience of attendees to take stock of fundamental rights amidst the current national, global, and European climate.

To do this, the two-day event consisted of informative presentations led by local and institutional representatives on subject matters including: Active European Citizens; The Right to Work in the European Union; the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union; and fundamental rights with children from minority groups and refugees during the Covid-19 outbreak. Importantly, participatory workshops and roundtable discussions were held whereby attendees contextualised the given topic in their own countries and reflected about possible challenges to human rights due to the pandemic. Finally, these were complemented by visits to historical sites including the Monastery of Timios Prodromos and the Racing Circuit of Serres.

The key takeaway from this meeting is twofold; in terms of the points raised as well as the practice of shared learning. Firstly, all European countries expressed concern at the challenges in protecting human rights during the Covid-19 pandemic in their individual countries - this can also be extended to the challenge of vaccine hesitancy experienced in many countries. Secondly, the practice of sharing experiences - to exchange information, and to examine common problems and good

practices through the perspective of Fundamental Rights was perceived as a positive and productive method to strengthen the European community.

Recommendations:

- **Young people must continue to be provided with opportunities to engage with the EU;** participation in EU programmes serves as vital opportunity to strengthen collaborations and develop new partnerships, on an organisational as well as personal level.
- **Raising awareness of the different opportunities available is critical to mobilise young people in Europe;** this provides inspiration and encourages young people to want to become active EU citizens.
- **The rUnite project can serve as a stepping-stone for civic participation in other EU initiatives.**

Conclusions from London: hate crime, restorative justice and empowering the community through local efforts

The international meetings in London took place in January and July 2022. The first, in January, was led by the overarching theme of addressing hate phenomena and lessons for today focusing on xenophobia, homophobia and other forms of intolerance, especially in the context of European youth. The event helped national and European representatives to come together and exchange ideas following a restorative justice methodology, where participants are invited to listen, share and reflect, in an atmosphere where all views are heard and everyone is treated equally and with respect.

A key takeaway from the event was the recorded increase in both the knowledge and awareness of the delegates, who left asking more questions than they originally had. This demonstrates the fundamental importance of the project and such events. Additionally, it was important for European citizens to understand the perspective from those living in the UK, who still consider themselves to be a very much part of Europe, and experiencing similar social challenges. It was emphasised that in the UK context, the issues of migration, Brexit, hate and intolerance have become more complex and intense over the last few years.

The second part of the event held in London in July 2022, aimed to share the conclusions of the first event to participants who had been unable to travel in January; additionally, to reflect on 1) the use of restorative justice to address crime; 2) how restorative justice practices are used locally to increase community cohesion.

To do so, participants were given an informative presentation titled “Introduction to Restorative Justice & complex cases including hate crime”, and invited to discuss this concept, which was new for many, while reflecting together on the existing politics of diversity in Europe. Additionally,

participants took part in the “Local Restorative Justice Hub” workshop, whereby they visited the sites of local projects - such as a community food bank and walking route - that are central to maintaining and improving physical and mental wellbeing. This second event highlighted the use of restorative justice as a tool, and reflecting on how these practices could be replicated to address social challenges across Europe.

Recommendations:

- **The values and practices of restorative justice can be used to address conflicts such hate crimes, while they can also serve as a tool for community-based empowerment.**
- **Digital and social media platforms must improve their systems to ban content that discriminates against minority groups in society and those with disabilities.** Without these mechanisms in place, such platforms actually serve to promote racism and hate.
- **Connections and liaisons between members of the community and the local council or national government are key to facilitate and strengthen peace and understanding.**

Conclusions from Italy: EU values, youth and lessons from history

The fourth international event took place in Italy in March 2022, with the overarching theme of the membership of the EU as a community - its origins and current status.

Titled "Treaty of Rome and the beginning of European Economic Community ", the event centred on the beginning of the EU integration process, aiming to achieve a better understanding of the EU and its values, and appreciate its history and cultural diversity.

To do this, the event consisted of participatory workshops, including: "The Treaty of Rome and the beginning of the European Economic Community", "The origin of the European Union, what can we learn?" and "Reshape the European Map". These encouraged international and local participants to share their knowledge about the European Union and its origins, while also comparing them to current themes, such as economic challenges and obstacles to gender and racial equality. The event also consisted of cultural visits across the city of Florence to visualise and experience where history has taken place; in particular, the visit focused on the most notable Florentine women throughout history.

A key takeaway from the event was the agreement that the EU has brought people values and rights such equality, freedom, human dignity, democracy, and the rule of Law; however, there is still much progress to be made in protecting these values and ensuring that all EU citizens can benefit from them. Additionally, participants expressed the value of sharing the different experiences that individual states have had regarding EU integration, and the origins of the EU itself.

Recommendations:

- **Revisiting and openly discussing historical moments informs EU citizens and equips them to more accurately address the current challenges that their countries and the EU is facing.**
- **The EU community must collaborate to improve the implementation of its values, including equality, freedom, human dignity, democracy, and the rule of Law.** Governments and citizens must still commit to working on EU values to ensure their guarantee in the whole of Europe.
- **The EU must continue to offer cultural and educational exchange programmes and working opportunities to young people.**

Conclusions from Poland: EU integration and mobilising young people

The sixth international event of the rEUnite project took place in Warsaw, Poland, in May 2022. The overarching theme of the event was to reflect on the early experience and interpretation of EU integration.

Titled “The Founding Scheme of the European Integration – the Declaration of Robert Schuman”, the aim of the event was to commemorate the first steps of European integration, as well as share what this entailed for different member states and how it was interpreted nationally. To do so, the coordinators identified the Robert Schuman Declaration as a remarkable milestone for the EU, encouraging attendees to reflect on this historical event to share experiences.

The event consisted of a combination of presentations, participatory workshops, games and participation in the celebration of Europe Day. Throughout the event, attendees’ experience was enriched through their engagement with young people from across Europe and local Polish schools, along with key stakeholders including the Polish representative of the European Commission in Poland and the Polish representative of the European Parliament Office, along with the Polish Robert Schuman Foundation themselves.

A key takeaway from the event was the increase in knowledge of attendees; participants managed to discover a lot of new information about the countries belonging to the EU and European institutions. Overall, the huge importance of the Robert Schuman Declaration for the start of the European Union was agreed. However, more collaboration and support is needed so that the integration of countries is complete.

Recommendations:

- **The EU should increase its encouragement of the sharing of historical knowledge between European countries - and especially amongst young people.** This (re)activates interest in the EU community and inspires the future generations to contribute to and protect it

- **The benefits of EU integration should be more widely circulated, so that citizens can maximise the full potential that the EU offers**
- **More commitment must be made to continue to offer pathways to unite countries and spaces to discuss shared learning, in particular for those who have had difficult entrances into the EU**

Conclusions from Spain: EU origins, influences, and current challenges

The seventh event was held in Madrid, Spain, in September 2022. The overarching theme of this final meeting of the rEUnite project was to provide a snapshot of the experience of entrances into the EU and how this influenced individual countries, alongside more current concerns and priorities for member states.

Titled “Democratic transition and accession to the European Union - Where does Europe end?”, the aim of the event was to debate specific aspects of EU enlargement and its effects on the EU and non EU citizens in their everyday life, alongside their personal and community development.

To address these themes and questions, the event consisted of a variation of presentations, visits, tours and activities to engage attendees and encourage them to interact with each other. These included: a quiz titled “What do you know about the EU?”; presentations from different partners on the social, political and economical influence of their country’s influence into the EU; a lecture about the new challenges in the EU including environment, human rights and migration, and youth; a workshop to discuss and share concerns on some common issues regarding the EU, including equality rights and new crises; and finally, tour groups to visit different historical and cultural sites across Madrid.

The key takeaway from this meeting was the value of reflecting on the various benefits of accession into the EU. Additionally, attendees debated some of the key topics facing Europe today, including: human rights doctrines, gender discrimination, employment, war and conflict refugees, and the protection of the environment in the context of climate change. In particular, there is still much progress to be made in key areas such as equality - including gender equality, abortion rights, and LGBTQ experiences.

Recommendations:

- **Overall, the EU should increase the level of accountability for states that fail to implement policies and meet the EU values.** This can help to address the challenge of wavering domestic political support that falls short of EU values and standards.
- **The EU must continue to support and encourage countries addressing collective issues, such as the refugee crisis, by protecting and increasing integration and employment support programmes.**

- **Extra measures are needed to put a stop to the devastation of the environment. These can include: to negotiate environmentally friendly trade deals and regulate hunting to preserve biodiversity.** Despite welcoming the European Green Deal introduced at the end of 2019, the public and state effort to combat it is lacking. On both European and individual levels, we are not yet doing enough.

Final concluding note

The emphasis on the need to collaborate and work together for the future, to protect and strengthen progress made, has been a key conclusion from the rEUnite project. This can be attributed in part to the fact that many of the countries and their representing participants had a shared experience of totalitarianism, and a shared experience of a dictatorship within the country's national identity. Most also had a shared experience of economic hardship or austerity, and varying levels of political support for the EU.

Many of the places and spaces visited throughout the project held symbolic meaning as a historic site (if not still a practical or official building), that evoked emotions - of either discomfort, or pride. The emotions of discomfort were related to experiences of hardship and struggles with civic participation, mainly before entering the EU, but also regarding ongoing challenges that EU countries face such as discrimination and hate crime, immigration, and employment. Meanwhile the emotions of pride related to struggles that were overcome or milestones reached. Regardless of the reason behind the emotion, the action forward remained clear: participants would like to avoid repeating the discomfort, and use the milestones as a source of motivation to better the future. Throughout the project, visiting the spaces has served as a reminder of the progress that has been achieved, but also of the fact that we need to remain united to keep progressing in future.

By uniting citizens from different horizons and backgrounds in cities and countries directly linked to historical milestones across Europe, the rEUnite project has successfully raised the awareness of participants of key moments within EU member states. Many participants had never before visited the countries in which the international meetings took place, nor met and engaged with citizens from those and other European countries. Importantly, a considerable number of the participants were young people. This is significant since it has strengthened the sense of common history and shared values amongst those that represent the future of Europe, and therefore increasing the sense of belonging and inspiration to collaborate and strive for an even better Europe in the coming years. Additionally, the level of awareness was increased through the dissemination of the events and shared learning experiences to each partners' network of contacts throughout the course of the project.

Finally, in addition to the recommendations produced from the events in each country throughout this report, it can be summarised that:

- **It must be a priority to protect the levels of citizen participation that European democracy introduced to countries when they first joined the EU.**
- However, the above step is not enough; **states must also receive more protection at EU level of democratic mechanisms, and accountability from the EU and other member states when the levels of democracy are not met.**
- **Similarly, progress - and public accountability - in implementing policies must remain on the agenda of the EC to monitor, particularly for key areas such as women's rights and the protection of the environment.**
- The project has shown that the **European youth are largely eager to collaborate together to strengthen and maximise the collective benefit that the EU can bring to countries and their individuals.**
- **The importance of opening and strengthening channels of communication between European countries - at an educational level, amongst schools, as well as at an institutional level are equally and fundamentally important.**
- **The sharing of knowledge and culture across Europe should be protected, celebrated, and encouraged at a domestic and international level. International travel and events can and do serve to break down barriers and unpack misconceptions. Ultimately, this allows Europeans from across the continent to meet and appreciate what unites them, rather than what divides them.** Learning about the history of Europe, and the reasons for certain challenges, are critical factors for European identity and the development of European citizenship and solidarity. To this end, it is expected that the events, themes and activities carried out as a part of the rEUnite project and detailed throughout this report can serve as examples to be repeated to increase civic awareness, discussion and participation in EU initiatives.

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