

# Do Erasmus students develop a European identity? How social interactions change the way citizens think about Europe

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*It might be expected that citizens who interact more frequently with people from other EU countries would be more likely to develop a European identity. But how do these kinds of social interactions affect identity in practice? Presenting research on the views of exchange students who have participated in the Erasmus programme, [Florian Stoeckel](#) writes that Erasmus students do tend to exhibit a stronger European identity once they return to their native country, but that this effect depends on the type of interaction they experience when abroad.*



Do social interactions between citizens from different European Union member states contribute to a sense of community among Europeans? One way of addressing this question is to look at the effects of the Erasmus student exchange programme. Based on [research](#) involving 1,200 Erasmus students, I have attempted to measure the effect of Erasmus on the political views of young Europeans and what exchange students might indicate about the future direction of Europe.

## **Social interactions and the creation of a shared identity**

Research on the issue of European identity has long grappled with the following puzzle: why is it that only a select number of EU citizens hold an exclusively national identity, while others identify as being both members of their national community and simultaneously EU citizens? This latter group makes up about half of Europe's population according to public opinion studies, although that number differs between EU member states and changes over time.

Whether citizens hold a European identity matters a lot for a number of issues Europe is currently facing. For instance, citizens who only hold a national identity tend to be more likely to perceive European integration as a threat to their nation, and as recent research shows, these citizens are also less willing to support fiscal transfers among Eurozone members.

In recent years, some studies of the topic have focused on social interactions and the role they might play in the emergence of a European identity. As early as the 1950s, the celebrated political scientist Karl Deutsch emphasised the importance of social interactions for a sense of community among citizens. His focus, however, was on citizens of a nation state: he theorised that contact between citizens in a country's remote locations and its centre are important for the extent to which citizens view each other as members of a shared national political community. This begs the question of whether this effect also works at a higher level, with interactions between the citizens of different nation states in Europe.

Social psychologists believe that contact situations can be transformative because they reduce prejudices and increase trust between individuals from different groups and backgrounds. By being in touch with citizens from other EU member states in class rooms, shared housing, and, last but not least, at parties, exchange students can become familiar with their peers from abroad, learn about commonalities, and get a better understanding of differences between them.



This process is fostered by a favourable contact situation. There are no hierarchical differences between those who interact – because everyone is a student – and the contact situation is intense enough to allow them to form friendships across group boundaries. Contact can therefore decrease the perceived distance between individuals from different EU countries. Students from other countries, who might have been seen as an out-group, could hence be regarded as members of a more encompassing in-group, that is, an in-group that includes several nationalities. And perceiving oneself and others as members of a wider and shared community of European nations is the necessary step toward developing a European identity.

### **Testing the theory**

Previous research has found that individuals who hold a more pronounced European identity also interact much more frequently with EU citizens from other countries. Yet, the causality might be inverted. Europeans might actually seek more contact with individuals in other EU member states because they already have a European identity. Several recent cross-sectional and longitudinal studies on this question show an entirely inconclusive result.

To find out if contact has an effect when accounting for initial levels of a European identity, I surveyed 1,200 German Erasmus students before they went abroad, after they returned, and again after an additional six months. The Erasmus programme provides the opportunity for about 300,000 European students annually to study at another European university without fees and allows them to easily transfer the credits they collect abroad.

The participants of my study went to 24 of the 28 member states of the EU, with France, Spain, and the United Kingdom being the most popular destinations. Two thirds of the students went abroad for one semester and one third went abroad for two semesters. Additionally, I collected data for a control group of about 300 comparable students who did not participate in a study abroad programme. This helps me to account for any change in students' identities that might have occurred during the same time irrespective of a study abroad.

Three results stand out. First, social interactions during a student exchange can contribute to a European identity. After Erasmus students return from their study abroad programme, they tend to be more likely to think of themselves as citizens of the EU, they believe they have more in common with other Europeans, and they exhibit greater pride in being European. The control group does not show a similar change during the same period of time.

Second, it is social interactions rather than the mere fact of being abroad that creates a stronger European identity. My survey shows that it is contact between study abroad students and Erasmus students from other countries, more so than contact with students from the host country, that contributes to a European identity. This is noteworthy, because many Erasmus students live in so-called “Erasmus bubbles” while they are abroad.

For instance, in campus housing, Erasmus students tend to live with other exchange students rather than with students from the host country. This is often seen as less than ideal because it involves fewer opportunities for

intense contact between exchange students and their hosts. Yet, apparently the interactions between a diverse group of international students mirrors more faithfully the diversity implied by a shared European identity than contact between Erasmus students and their hosts.

Third, the identity change that Erasmus students exhibit after their return appears to persist. Their more pronounced European identity is stable at the time of my third survey, which I conducted half a year after students had returned. Erasmus students also showed more awareness of the benefits of European integration after their return, although the identity change does not immediately translate into more support for the political institutions of the EU. While Erasmus students who interact primarily with their hosts do not exhibit a more pronounced European identity, the experience still left a deep imprint on them: they are more attached to their host country and they show more trust as well as a heightened feeling of familiarity with their hosts long after their return.

In sum, opportunities that allow Europeans from different countries to interact intensely can contribute to a shared European identity. The high hopes that European institutions pin on efforts like the Erasmus programme do not seem to be unjustified. However, few Europeans experience the EU like Erasmus participants. Even at universities only a small proportion of students take part in exchange programmes.

If we want more citizens to interact with their fellow Europeans abroad, we need to think about a number of important questions. First, some students in my control group reported that they were interested in a study abroad but could not go because of insufficient funds; after all, the Erasmus stipend covers only a small share of the costs involved. Second, a study abroad is not yet a standard part of the majority of Europe's university curricula, let alone non-academic professional training programmes. An exchange could become even more beneficial among professionals: a promising example would be some local governments that now encourage their staff to go on exchange trips to sister cities.

Although it is useful to focus on the conditions needed for contact to translate into a European identity, it should also be recognised that much social interaction among Europeans does not take place under the ideal conditions of the Erasmus programme. This raises a number of questions for future research. Tourists only travel for short periods to other European countries, only rarely allowing them to have intense interactions. How much contact is necessary?

Europeans from other countries might also move into someone's neighbourhood, thereby creating intense contact that might have come without anyone desiring it. As such the question of when this contact creates conflict and when it creates a sense of community is also important. Social media platforms make it easy for Europeans to have intense – albeit not physical – social interactions across borders. But it remains to be seen whether these channels open up a mechanism for those who cannot participate in programmes like Erasmus to develop ties with Europeans abroad.

*For more information on this topic, see the author's recent journal article in [Political Psychology](#).*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: an Erasmus party in Linköping, Sweden. Credits: [Gaugi227](#) (CC BY-SA 3.0)*

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