

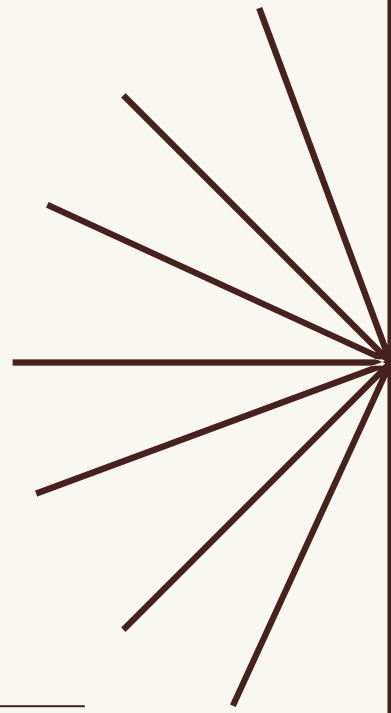


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# INTEGRATION THROUGH THE TRAIN SYSTEM

Railway Diplomacy: Bridging Gaps

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# Executive Summary

Rising Euroscepticism across the EU threatens the future of the European Project and requires multi-faceted solutions. Policymakers must examine the many factors and demographics that contribute to rising Euroscepticism and leverage diverse policy tools to combat the problem. This policy brief is directed at the European Commission, specifically Pia Ahrenkilde Hansen of the European Union (EU) Directorate-General of Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture (DG EAC), and presents policy options for using the Erasmus+ Program to combat Euroscepticism and improve European integration through cross-border train programs.

These policy options include 1) improving the DiscoverEU program to become more inclusive, 2) creating a DiscoverEU program targeted at seniors, and 3) creating a pilot program to establish additional culture train programs. While all policy options would help leverage cross-border train systems and increase social contact to improve connection and cohesion between European societies, with limited resources and implementation capacity, this memo recommends prioritizing option 3) establishing culture trains, given it is the most targeted policy option and it is relatively low cost.

The brief also recommends implementing policy option 1) to improve the DiscoverEU program in the mid-term, because it would be relatively easy to implement given that it can build on the existing Erasmus+ Program initiative. Lastly, in the longer-term, and contingent on a significant source of funding being available, the brief recommends policy option 2) establish a DiscoverEU seniors program given its targeted at demographics with the highest consistent levels of Euroscepticism.



# Background

## Sceptics on the rise

Euroscepticism is one of the most pressing challenges currently facing the European Union (EU) as it threatens the foundation of the European project: unity coexisting with rich diversity. Policymakers must address this challenge to strengthen European integration and promote economic development.

Euroscepticism arises from a confluence of factors, such as citizens grappling with the implications of a shared European identity alongside their national affiliations. Scholars of Euroscepticism, such as Buturoiu (2016), argue that the shift in public opinion is a threat that requires EU policymakers' attention because it will have consequential short and long-term impacts on the future of the EU. Some scholars also argue that the EU is being integrated at an uneven pace that leaves some in society behind, with higher levels of Euroscepticism associated with regions of lower economic development (De Vries, 2018, 1).

Researchers have found an increase in social connectedness between regions that is associated with a rise in the number of passengers that travel between the regions by train (Bailey et al., 2020).

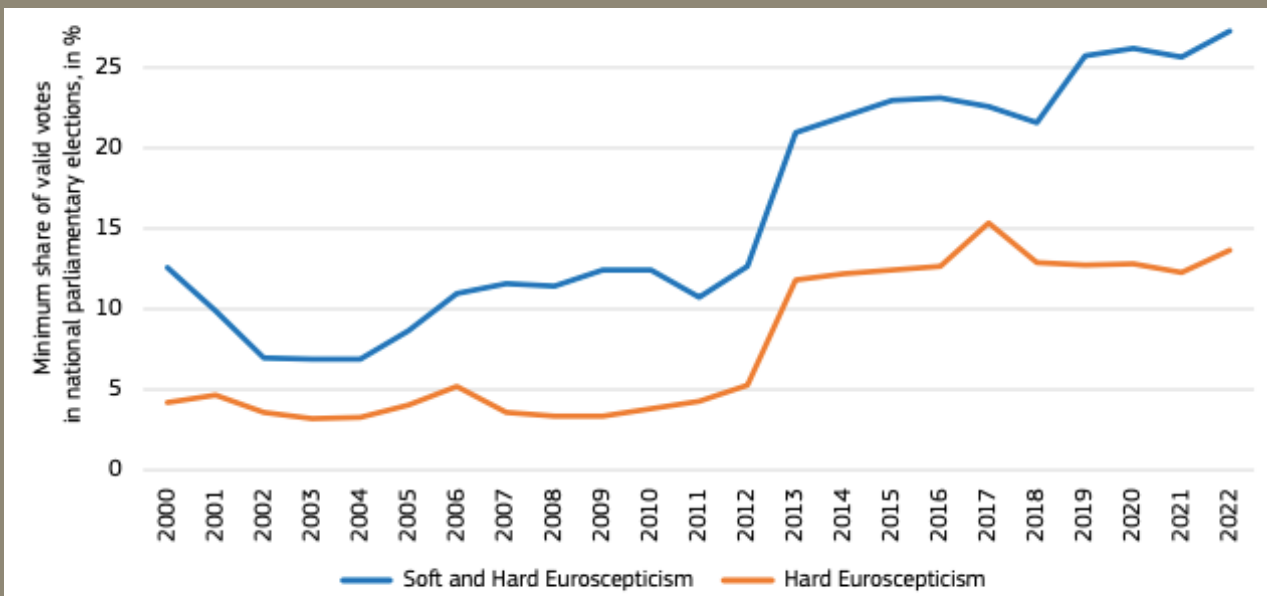
Additionally, the European Commission recently announced infrastructure investments to further boost cross-border rail (European Commission, 2023a). This brief will present recommendations for supplementing these infrastructure investments with programs to promote further European integration using the rail system. The brief presents three policy options to strengthen cooperation and a common European identity through cross-border train travel projects as part of the Erasmus+ program under the European Union Directorate-General of Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture. These policy options aim to get more EU citizens on board the European project by leveraging the rail system.

To foster stronger European connections between all citizens, the brief proposes:

1. Improving the DiscoverEU program to become more inclusive
2. Creating a DiscoverEU Seniors program to expand opportunities for seniors in Erasmus+ integration efforts
3. Create a pilot program to expand Culture Trains.

**Figure 1: Votes for Parties Opposed to EU Integration**

in national parliamentary elections in the EU-27, 2000-2022



# Policy Option 1

## A More Inclusive DiscoverEU Program

**The DiscoverEU program needs to become more inclusive:**

- **Remove the exclusionary entrance quiz on EU knowledge**
- **Increase the visibility of the DiscoverEU Inclusion Action amongst youth with fewer opportunities by:**
  - a. Including information on the Inclusion Action in the European Youth Portal**
  - b. Marketing the Inclusion Action on social media**
- **Integrate the Inclusion Action initiative into the DiscoverEU, have inclusion as the norm**

One way to strengthen European integration is to facilitate young people's engagement with the EU by increasing the social connectedness of young people with regions outside of their country through travel. This is currently already happening on a small scale through the DiscoverEU project, operated by the Erasmus+ Program. However, the current project is too limited, as the current selection procedure for the **DiscoverEU program favors participants** who have the **most pre-existing knowledge of the EU** and who are from a **socioeconomic background that can independently afford to travel**.

By adapting the selection process to become more inclusive to precisely those young people who lack knowledge of the EU or who have limited means to travel otherwise, the DiscoverEU project has the potential to positively contribute to the social connectedness of European citizens who would otherwise not be able to travel or familiarize themselves with other EU countries. Policymakers have attempted to fix this problem through the relatively unknown Inclusion Action initiative, but it has thus far failed to engage young people with fewer opportunities on a significant scale.

The DiscoverEU initiative, launched in 2018, enables 72,000 18-year-olds each year to win an Interrail pass.

In the selection process, applicants must answer questions about the EU and EU initiatives that target youth (EU Commission, 2023; HRDC, 2020). This procedure may favor youth who are more skilled in information searching or who already have some EU knowledge and exclude those who could benefit most from the program. We therefore strongly recommend the factual EU knowledge test to be removed.

**Currently, no travel expenses are covered by the DiscoverEU program, except for the Interrail pass. This means that the initiative only serves applicants with the financial means to cover their travel insurance, accommodation, and food (EU Commission 2019). This prevents young people with fewer opportunities from participating in the DiscoverEU project.**

In 2022, the National Agencies launched a DiscoverEU Inclusion Action aimed at facilitating the participation of young people with fewer opportunities in the DiscoverEU project. To achieve this, the Inclusion Action allows organizations such as NGOs or informal groups of up to five individuals to apply for the grant (EU Commission, 2023b). Compared to DiscoverEU, the Inclusion Action covers all travel costs, enabling youth to participate in the initiative regardless of finances or disabilities (EU Commission, n.d.). In the first call of the Inclusion Action, 108 projects were accepted (EU Commission, 2023b), which is relatively few compared to the total number of DiscoverEU participants.

Currently, the Inclusion Action is inadequately advertised as it is not visible on the European Youth Portal, where regular applications are received and the DiscoverEU project is promoted. This excludes youth with fewer opportunities and prevents the project from reaching its full potential. **Instead, Erasmus+ should integrate the Inclusion Action initiative into the DiscoverEU program.** The next step would be to **increase advertisement** through channels that reach young Europeans from all walks of life.

# Policy Option 2

## Create a “DiscoverEU Seniors” Bridging Gaps, Fostering Unity

**Create a DiscoverEU Seniors program, based on the current DiscoverEU program, but for Europeans aged 65 and older. DiscoverEU Seniors winners would receive a Interrail pass for cross border travel paired with discounts on cultural visits, local transport, accommodation and meals in order to facilitate travel among seniors to other member states.**

Support for Eurosceptic parties has surged since the 2008 financial crisis. The number of Eurosceptic parties in EU Member States increased from 5% to 14% (European Commission, 2023). The distribution of Eurosceptic votes is the highest in less developed regions, contributing to the phenomenon of “regional development traps” that drive Euroscepticism (McCann, 2022).

### **Euroscepticism among older and less educated populations**

The surge of discontent within the EU has been attributed to various factors, with some identifying the resurgence of identity issues as a significant driver. This discontent is fueled by the perception that changes associated with diversity and shifting social values pose a threat to individuals.

Notably, older individuals and those with lower levels of educational attainment are considered more vulnerable to these sentiments.

**Older people in economically deprived areas who lack disposable income to travel could benefit from a proposed DiscoverEU Senior Pass as a means to reduce Euroscepticism. By encouraging travel, particularly by those from regions once behind the Iron Curtain, this initiative aims to provide cultural immersion, promote understanding of different social values and benefit the struggling European tourism industry post-COVID-19 (Rodríguez-Pose & Dijkstra, 2020).**

Additionally, the attitude is prevalent with people residing in areas with limited population mobility, suggesting a correlation between restricted movement and increased Euroscepticism (European Commission, 2023).

### **Implementation of DiscoverEU Seniors**

One fifth of Europeans are older than 65 (AgePlatform, n.d.). Targeting this population can achieve substantial progress due to the demographic’s size and high levels of Euroscepticism. Eligible participants (aged 65 and over) can apply in groups of up to 4, as Age Platform found that senior citizens prefer to travel in groups (Age Platform, n.d.). The program would be managed by the Adult Education Unit of Erasmus+. Pass benefits would include discounts on cultural visits, local transport, accommodation and meals, as well as accessibility assistance and free rail travel. Preference would be given to applicants coming from or planning to travel to less economically developed regions.

### **Program promotion and partnerships**

In order to make the program more accessible, local partners should assist with applications, distribute materials, and organize information sessions (Rodríguez-Pose & Dijkstra, 2020). Targeted marketing to older people could include radio, TV, print media and partnerships with tourism agencies. Erasmus+ local partners will organize information sessions and establish partnerships with providers catering to senior citizens. Passes can be mailed or collected from local partner offices, along with brochures and information session schedules.

### **Pilot editions and expected results**

Two proposed pilot rounds in March and October 2025 could distribute a first batch of DiscoverEU Senior passes. Pre- and post-trip surveys will measure program effectiveness. Expected outcomes include increased cultural understanding, reduced Euroscepticism, increased EU awareness, and increased life satisfaction through facilitated travel.

# Policy Option 3

## Create a Pilot Program to Establish New “Culture Train” Routes

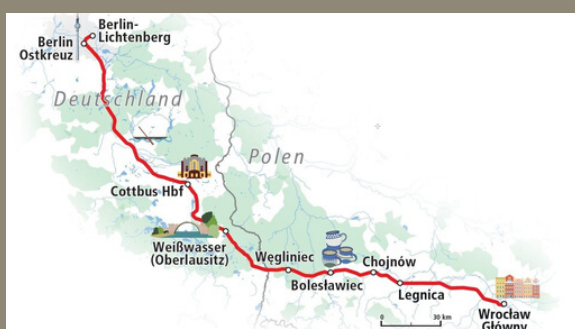
**Create a pilot program to provide seed funding to establish “culture train” routes to demonstrate cross-member state connections and facilitate the exchange of people and ideas through historically connected cities or towns in multiple member states.**

### Background on Existing Culture Train

In 2016, Wrocław earned the designation of the European Union’s Capital of Culture (European Commission, 2015). To facilitate participation in this event, the Berlin municipal council collaborated with Wrocław to establish the first direct train connection between the two cities. This special “culture train” operated every weekend, facilitating Berliners and Wrocławers visiting each other’s cities with stops in smaller cities along the route (Kulturprojekte Berlin, 2023). The train journey featured cultural presentations specific to Berlin and Wrocław, demonstrating their historical connections and national performances and discussions on shared experiences.

The program aims to foster understanding among the respective populations and increase tourism (European Commission, 2018). In its first year, the program was financed at €300,000, primarily by local governments (Wrocław, 2016). The culture train was originally planned for one term in 2016, but the program’s success led to its continuation. Today, demand remains high, and the program is now partially operated by a non-profit focused on promoting Berlin’s cultural sector, demonstrating diminished reliance on government funding and the potential to transition to private sector funding.

### Culture Train Berlin-Wrocław



### Proposed Policy Details

- The European Commission, through the Erasmus + Program, should release a request for applications for 5-10 projects to establish promotional “culture train” networks, similar to the Berlin-Wrocław culture train, that aim to facilitate the movement of tourists across member states that have a historical connection, encouraging tourism between the locations paired with educational programming on the historical or current connections of the locations.
- For example, future culture train routes could include: cities founded by the Romans, historical mercantilist ties of cities in the Benelux, the shared history of Occitania and Catalonia, or connecting the European Capitals of Culture.
- Eligible entities for the grants would include local governments, chambers of commerce, NGOs, and others to provide “seed” funds for the establishment of the program, such as staffing, promotional tickets, programming development, and marketing of the culture trains.
- Strong preference will be given to applications that include stops in localities with small populations and economically distressed areas.

### Strengths of the Policy Option:

- **By giving preference to less populated towns and economically distressed areas, the program is targeted at areas with lower rates of economic development and higher rates of Euroscepticism.**
- **The program also explicitly includes cultural and educational programming aimed at demonstrating the economic, social, and cultural connections across member states, therefore explicitly demonstrating a shared European identity and the benefits of freedom of mobility.**

### Potential Drawback of the Policy Option:

- **Those who are most likely to be interested in this programming may be those who are predisposed to already having a strong European identity, therefore implementers should aim to market towards regions and demographics with higher levels of Euroscepticism.**

# Final Recommendation

## FURTHER EU UNITY THROUGH CULTURE TRAINS

While all policy options support further cross-border train travel and increase social connectedness to improve cohesion between European societies, this brief recommends prioritizing the creation of Culture Trains, Policy Option 3, as it explicitly provides cultural programming to demonstrate cross-border connections. The option is also relatively low cost due to its long-term ability to be transferred to the private sector or a public-private partnership, as is demonstrated by the existing culture train. The program is also moderately easy to implement, given that a current model exists.

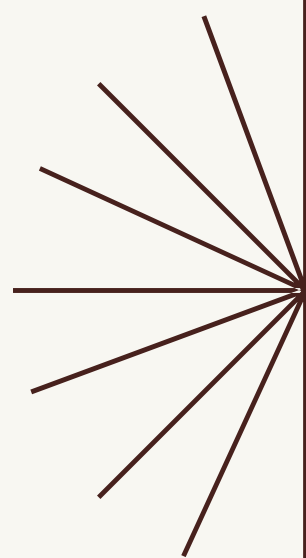
In order to successfully implement the option, we recommend that the Directorate-General of Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture, through the Erasmus+ Program, execute the next concrete steps:

- 1. Create a working group with the Directorate General for Mobility and Transport, given its connections with transport stakeholders.**
- 2. Conduct outreach to local governments, national ministries of transport, cultural institutions, NGOs, and transportation companies that may be interested in applying for the new pilot program to increase awareness and attract potential partners.**
- 3. Develop and provide technical assistance, which may include a handbook or presentations with practical information for potential applicants to assist with their applications.**
- 4. Work with the implementers of the Berlin-Wroclaw culture train to learn and disseminate best practices on how to establish, market, scale, and sustain the culture train model.**

### OTHER POLICY OPTIONS AS MID- AND LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

In the mid-term time frame, we recommend implementing policy option 1: making the DiscoverEU program more inclusive through expanding the DiscoverEU Inclusion Action program and integrating it into the already existing DiscoverEU framework. This is not the preferred recommendation of the brief because expanding the program significantly and providing additional travel benefits would be more expensive. However, the factual EU knowledge quiz should immediately be removed, given that it would be an easy step to implement quickly.

Lastly, in the long-term, and contingent on a significant source of new funding, the brief recommends policy option 2: the establishment of a DiscoverEU Senior program, due to its emphasis on the demographics that display the highest consistent levels of Euroscepticism and focus on economically distressed areas. This option would require further market research to ensure it is supplemental to, rather than duplicative with, existing discounts for elderly and is effective at removing a travel barrier for a population that otherwise would not travel to other member states.







# Meet The Team

Clara Korsås  
Dušan Popov  
Francesco Zamiri  
Isabel Coughlin  
Jidde Telgenkamp  
Job de Jager  
Naiza Reina Brazil  
Rebecca De Romanis  
Rime Ourhim  
Rutendo Mukono  
Tamar Zuurveld  
Taufiq E Faruque  
Tilman Voss  
Tomás Elia

Prague,  
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