

SCIENCES PO GRENOBLE – UGA Année 5

Parcours Gouvernance Européenne

25/08/2022

*Tuteur de Stage (at Sciences Po): Laurent Labrot*

*(in PRISM Impresa Sociale s.r.l.): Alessandro Melillo*



**THE ERASMUS + PROGRAMME AS A CHANNEL FOR THE EU AGENDA**

**The experience of the Project Managers in PRISM Impresa Sociale s.r.l. in dialoguing with the EU Institutions.**

*Mémoire de stage (23/02/2022 – 05/08/2022)*

***Salamone Elia Andrea***

*Laurent Labrot*



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## *Abstract*

The study planned to carry out in this research concerns the relationship between the EU institutions and the Project Managers that operate in the framework of the Erasmus + programme. The idea of this research has been inspired by the experiences lived during my internship experience in “PRISM Impresa Sociale s.r.l.”, a social enterprise that works in the field of international cooperation and social and cultural development of local communities.

This research draws from a broad literature in the fields of Europeanization, multilevel governance and project cycle management as elements that constitute a system of inputs that can be interpreted in a double dimension of both top-down and bottom-up; moreover, the literature review brings to the conceptual framework elements concerning the neofunctionalist conception of policy spillover, that is consequently applied to the research question as key feature in describing both the variables and the hypotheses underlying the research analysis.

The methodology applied consists mainly of qualitative instruments with a few quantitative features set to enable a more stable interpretation of the responses collected via questionnaire using the EUSurvey platform.

The main purpose of this research is to highlight the ways and modes in which the Erasmus + Programme is affected by both the intervention of the European Commission and the Project Managers at different levels and phases of its policy process.

**Keywords:** *Erasmus +, Europeanization, Project Cycle Management, Policy Spillover, EU Agenda.*

## *List of Acronyms*

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| CBT   | Community-Based Tourism                         |
| EACEA | European Education and Culture Executive Agency |
| ERDF  | European Regional Development Fund              |
| KA    | Key Action                                      |
| NA    | National Agency                                 |
| NGO   | Non-Governmental Organization                   |
| OMC   | Open Method of Coordination                     |
| PCM   | Project Cycle Management                        |
| PM    | Project Manager                                 |
| PRISM | PRomozione Internazionale Sicilia-Mondo         |
| SDG   | Sustainable Development Goal                    |
| ToC   | Theory of Change                                |
| VET   | Vocational and Educational Training             |

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“Tu ne cede malis, sed contra audentior ito.”

-Virgilio, Eneide.

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## ***Introduction***

- *The rationale behind the research: the internship experience in “PRISM Impresa Sociale s.r.l.”*

“PRISM Impresa Sociale s.r.l.”<sup>1</sup> is the social enterprise for which I have worked as an intern in the previous months. The main aim of this social enterprise is to develop projects, both in private and public partnerships, meant to enhance the social, cultural, and economic progress of local communities in an international and interconnected context. Its involvement in European programmes is very wide and varied, as its most significant projects have been brought under the Interreg Programme, but also with other European flagship Programmes; hence, the background of this social enterprise (operating since 2012 in this field) is very experienced, and yet still growing in ambition and scale of the projects.

The internship experience in “PRISM” has brought many ideas, inputs and instruments that led me to develop a sufficient awareness in observing the context of Project Cycle Management and identifying the political structure underneath it. Starting from the tasks that I have been assigned during the internship period, I have had the opportunity to have a close look on how the Project Managers (hereinafter referred to as PMs) start from basic ideas and develop them, in cooperation with the PMs coming from the various partnerships, in an operative and impactful way. Among all the projects I have had the chance to witness (both in the development and implementation phase, and coming also from other partner countries), many of them came from the Erasmus + programme. This aspect of my experience in “PRISM” has led me to wonder how the topics of these projects emerged, since they were very specific and up-to-date with the EU Agenda, with a clear influence provided by each partner country’s local context whenever the activities were meant to take place in a specific venue; this synthesis of local instances concerning a supranational and European issue made me question whether there was a trend in this interaction between PMs and EU institutions in such a peculiar European programme and, in case there actually was one, what a proper study about this phenomenon would bring as findings.

After having considered the context and the relevance of the topic, in light of the knowledge and insights acquired throughout the period of my internship in “PRISM”, the research will be structured as follows: for instance, the current literature pertaining to the European integration process and the Erasmus + programme will be undertaken and assessed; after that, the conceptual framework and the variables around which the research question is put will be expressed; then, the research hypothesis

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<sup>1</sup> You can know more about PRISM Impresa Sociale on the website: <https://www.prisonline.eu/>

will be expressed, along with the methodology meant to test it; finally, the findings provided by the research will be presented and, along with it, the final considerations pertaining to the research question.

- The Erasmus+ Programme

The Erasmus + programme is one of the main policies brought by the European Union. Its coverage in themes, actions and actors involved has been developing up until now from its birth. In fact, the current Erasmus + programme merged other predecessors<sup>2</sup> under the same brand, gathering various and different project and practices that enrich the mere conception of formal education as it has been in the previous programming periods for what regards the Erasmus + programme<sup>3</sup>. In fact, as the Figure 1 shows, before this unification that happened in the programming period 2014-2020<sup>4</sup>, there were many different minor programmes that covered the various areas that are now only covered by Erasmus +, namely:

- Five predecessor programmes in the field of education and training (Lifelong Learning Programme, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alfa, Edulink)
- One predecessor programme in the field of youth (Youth in Action)
- One predecessor Preparatory Action in the field of sport.

|                              | Type of evaluation |         | Field coverage |     |    |    |    |       |       |
|------------------------------|--------------------|---------|----------------|-----|----|----|----|-------|-------|
|                              | Mid-term           | Ex-post | School         | VET | AL | HE | JM | Youth | Sport |
| Erasmus+                     | ✓                  |         | ✓              | ✓   | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓     | ✓     |
| LLP                          |                    | ✓       | ✓              | ✓   | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |       |       |
| YiA                          |                    | ✓       |                |     |    |    |    | ✓     |       |
| Erasmus Mundus               |                    | ✓       |                |     |    | ✓  |    |       |       |
| Tempus                       |                    | ✓       |                |     |    | ✓  |    |       |       |
| Alfa                         |                    | ✓       |                |     |    | ✓  |    |       |       |
| Edulink                      |                    | ✓       |                |     |    | ✓  |    |       |       |
| Preparatory Actions in Sport |                    | ✓       |                |     |    |    |    |       | ✓     |

Figure 1 Evaluation Table of Erasmus + and predecessor programmes

Source: European Commission. Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture., ICF., 2017. Combined evaluation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes: final report : main evaluation report (Volume 1). Publications Office, LU.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission. Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture., ICF., 2017. Combined evaluation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes: final report : main evaluation report (Volume 1). Publications Office, LU.

<sup>3</sup> Erasmus+ Mid-term evaluation [WWW Document], 2016. . European Economic and Social Committee. URL <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/information-reports/erasmus-mid-term-evaluation> (accessed 5.29.22).

<sup>4</sup> Erasmus+: The first year [WWW Document], . European Commission - European Commission. URL [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/MEMO\\_16\\_143](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/MEMO_16_143) (accessed 7.30.22).

From the programming period 2014-2020 onward, the brand-new structure presented for the Erasmus + programme had synthesized all those sectors and developed a unique structure meant to manage the new flow of applications. As the Figure 2 shows, the structure<sup>5</sup> of the Erasmus + Programme is certainly peculiar: there are three main dimensions that can describe the structure and substance of this programme, which are the domains, the programme strands, and the management modes.

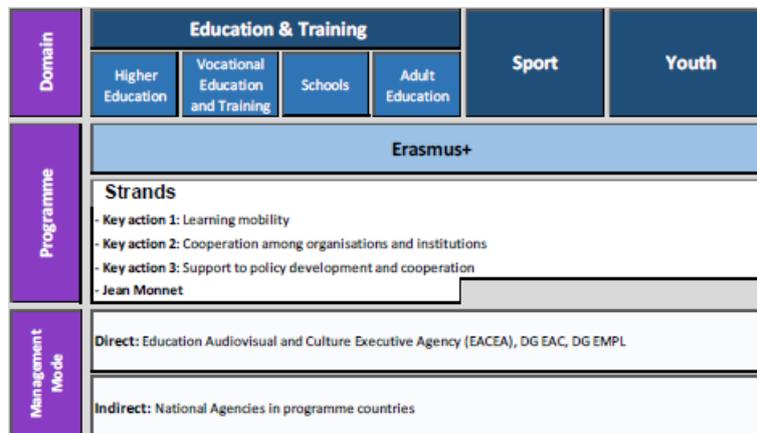


Figure 2 Erasmus + Programme structure

Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Y., Sport and Culture, 2021. Erasmus+ annual report 2020.

Starting from the domains, we can see that the three main priorities that compose Erasmus + are those of Education and Training (that does not only concern the field of higher education, as it is mainly conceived), Sport and Youth.

As for the programme strands, we can see that (apart from the Jean Monnet actions that are specifically concerned with the improvement of teaching, learning and research) there are three main key actions (KA): the KA1 supports those projects that concern learning mobilities, youth exchanges (although it also involves adults, organizations, trainees and trainers etc.) and other activities meant to promote international and intercultural dialogue among people; the KA2 (cooperation among organisations and institutions) covers a broader part of the political role of the programme, as it mainly promotes partnerships and networks (but also capacity building projects) in various educational fields (school education, adult education, vocational education and training, youth and sport), but also for the more general purpose of international cooperation (it is certainly worth to be mentioned that small-scale partnerships are strongly promoted in order to grant access to the programme even to those individuals and organizations that would be harder to reach if left alone); finally, the KA3 (support to policy development and cooperation) is certainly the Key Action that,

<sup>5</sup> What is the structure of the Erasmus+ Programme? | Erasmus+ [WWW Document], URL <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/node/49> (accessed 7.23.22)

more than the others, involves an active participation to the policy-making process and a constructive dialogue with stakeholders, key actors and interest groups, as it promotes projects concerning the OMC (Open Method of Coordination), policy experimentation in collaboration with public authorities and, amongst other possible purposes, cooperation with international organisations.

Finally, the management modes that compose the Erasmus + programme are mainly two: a direct channel, and an indirect one. The direct Channel is managed by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) of the European Commission, which is yet responsible for a minority of the project funded (as shown in Figure 3). On the other hand, the indirect mode is handled by National Agencies (NA) that manage and monitor the funded projects, while they are also a supporting body for any logistical and bureaucratic issue that might concern the partnerships while implementing their projects.

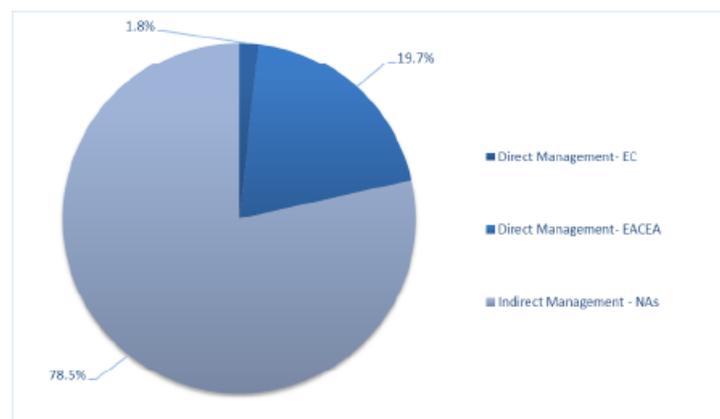


Figure 3 Percentage of Erasmus + Budget Administration (year 2021)

Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2021. Erasmus+ annual report 2020.

Apart from this, there is a purpose that has always been the core of the programme itself: spreading the European values in the fields of higher education, adult learning, sport, and other related relevant fields.

As for “European values”, much could be intended and put under this category; for this reason, the literature has more than once studied the indirect effects of the Erasmus + programme as a vehicle of soft law in different fields, from the national agendas regarding education to the neighbourhood relationships<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, one feature of this impact caused by the Erasmus + programme has not

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<sup>6</sup> Verdun, A., 2021. The EU-Canada Strategic Partnership: Challenges and Opportunities, in: Ferreira-Pereira, L.C., Smith, M. (Eds.), The European Union’s Strategic Partnerships, The European Union in International Affairs. Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 121–148. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66061-1\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66061-1_6)

been fully addressed by the literature: the capacity of spreading specific points of the European agenda through the projects applied and implemented under this programme.

*“The Erasmus+ programme aims to help generations of Europeans to become active citizens, with the skills, knowledge and experience to tackle the challenges facing our society, both now and in the years to come.*

*These challenges include rising unemployment, climate change, economic and post-conflict migration, digitalisation, globalisation, physical inactivity and the multilingual structure of Europe’s united but diverse nations.”*

As shown by this sentence reported in the Erasmus + page of the European Commission website<sup>7</sup>, although it is not explicitly expressed, the Commission is well aware of the crucial importance of the Erasmus + programme as not only a vector for expanding the sense of European citizenship or the approach towards the European values of freedom and democracy, but also as a proper means to achieve a greater impulse on the European political agenda. For this reason, it is fundamental to trace the social, as well as academic, relevance of this research before delving into it.

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<sup>7</sup> Priorities 2019-2024 | Erasmus+ [WWW Document], URL <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/node/2827> (accessed 5.29.22).

- Social and Academic relevance

For instance, it is reported that the current programming period has provided to the Erasmus + programme a funding that has doubled if compared to the previous programming period (“It has an estimated budget of €26.2 billion. This is nearly double the funding compared to its predecessor programme (2014-2020).”<sup>8</sup>); it is in fact worth mentioning from the 2020 Erasmus + annual report<sup>9</sup> that:

*“The programme has already exceeded its target of supporting 4 million learning mobility periods in 2019. With a capacity to fully absorb funds and an error rate below 2%, the programme is well-placed to grow further in the next Multiannual Financial Framework”.*

As a matter of fact, the increase on the funding finds its explanation on the capacity of the participants to absorb the planned budget of the programme fully and efficiently, and to even exceed the target results set for it; consequently, given the great stability and effectiveness of Erasmus +, it is crucial to correctly assess the potentialities of this programme to understand what political impact it might have throughout the programming period 2021-2027. Moreover, it is reported in the last midterm evaluation<sup>10</sup> report for the Erasmus + programme that “Erasmus+ seems to be all too often equated with student mobility”, leading to a misinterpreted perception of the programme that critically reduces its potentialities and opportunities for both the European citizens for whom this is meant and for the stakeholders that participate in the programme through partnerships or project development.

For what regards the academic relevance of the research, the literature on European studies is very often concerned with the European programmes in general, which means that the European policy process is already treated under many lights and perspectives. However, the Erasmus + programme, especially today when it encompasses not only students' exchanges, but also VET (vocational and educational training), innovative conceptions of education (like non-formal education, for instance) and many other influential projects and practices, is now worth being considered in terms of its broader impact in our society. Moreover, little space has been given to the relation of dialogue among the actors that apply for their projects and between them and the EU in a systemic conception; this leads to a blank space in considering the role of the Erasmus + programme inside the framework of

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<sup>8</sup> What is Erasmus+? | Erasmus+ [WWW Document], URL <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/node/2515> (accessed 5.29.22).

<sup>9</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2021. Erasmus+ annual report 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Erasmus+ Mid-term evaluation [WWW Document], 2016. . European Economic and Social Committee. URL <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/information-reports/erasmus-mid-term-evaluation> (accessed 5.29.22).

the European integration process. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to give light to the role played by both the private and European institutional actors inside the context of the project development under the Erasmus + programme; meaning that not only the role of the actors, but also the role of the programme, will be put under analysis in order to assess the limits and opportunities that each of them have.

## ***Literature Review and Conceptual Framework***

### ***- Literature Review***

Before starting to analyse the literature concerning the operative concept that will be applied during the research, a broader approach that concerns the cultural dimension of the EU policies and, more specifically, of the Erasmus + programme might be crucial; the reason lies on the specifically cultural purpose that is often expressed amongst the aims of the programme, meaning that the EU institutions clearly see the value of it in promoting the EU ideals. On this matter, much valuable information can be discovered by delving into, for instance, the effects of the Erasmus + programme as a booster for EU citizenship and European culture in general; as a matter of fact, the literature concerning this programme and its relationship to the concept of “European culture”<sup>11</sup> is very broad and varied and would enable a resourceful context analysis.

As a starting point, a fruitful contribution has been given by Ieracitano in her article concerning the so-called “Erasmus generation”<sup>12</sup> and its approach to the concept of European culture after living the Erasmus experience. As a matter of fact, Ieracitano highlights how the main scope of the Erasmus programme, as it has been identified by the literature has shifted from a merely educational programme to one that aims to construct and promote European civic experiences:

*“The Erasmus programme could represent a "civic experience"<sup>13</sup> [...] As asserted by Mitchell (2012)<sup>14</sup>, "The idea is that intermixing students of different nationalities [...] instils or enhance a sense of European identity among participants and serve as a path to creating truly European citizens" aimed at forging a European consciousness.”*

As shown in this quote, it is commonly agreed that the Erasmus programme (and even more now that this has incorporated other programmes) has been evolving in its purpose and overall usefulness to the EU political system; moreover, it is also highlighted the important role of students as multiplying agent in the European integration phenomenon (in Ieracitano’s article they are considered as a “valid group” by various authors<sup>15</sup>). As for the results carried out by this research article, the responses

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<sup>11</sup> Concerning this topic, it is highly suggested to see: BROSSAT, Caroline. La culture européenne : définitions et enjeux. Bruxelles, Bruylant, 1999

<sup>12</sup> Ieracitano, F., 2014. New European citizens The Erasmus generation between awareness and scepticism. European Journal of Research on Social Studies 1, 16–16. <https://doi.org/10.15526/ejrss.201416199>

<sup>13</sup> Papatsiba, V., (2006). Making Higher Education More European Through Student Mobility? Revisiting EU initiatives in the Context of the Bologna Process. Comparative Education, 42, (1), 93-111.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell, K., (2012). Student mobility and European identity: Erasmus study as a civic experience?. Journal of Contemporary European Research, 8 (4), 491-518.

See also: Karolewski, I., & Kaina, V., (Eds.) (2012). Civic Resources and the Future of the European Union. New York: Routledge.

<sup>15</sup> Concerning this topic, it is suggested to see:

Rogers, N., & Scannell, R., (2005). Free movement of persons in the enlarged European Union. London: Sweet and Maxwell.

Recchi, E., Favell, A., (Eds.) (2009). Pioneers of European integration: citizenship and mobility in the EU. Cheltenham: Elgar

collected brought to a conclusion that regards more the evolution of a European Culture in the future, rather than a current phenomenon; nonetheless, it is esteemed the role of the mobility across the EU as a means to bridge the gap amongst all the various and different national cultures and to develop some common points that constitute the heart of a developing European culture.

The topic of “European Culture” in the framework of the Erasmus + programme can be even more developed by mentioning the study brought by Oborune<sup>16</sup>. In this paper, she puts in discussion the nature and the current progress of the concepts of “European Culture” and “European Identity”:

*“First, to my mind European identity does exist. However, it is a tough task to study and measure European identity. Second, European identity is a feeling of belonging to a distinctive European culture (cultural European identity) and/or European Union (political European identity). Third, bottom-up approach will be used in this research. Fourth, to my mind European and national identities are complementary. Finally, the formation of European identity is a complex project to accomplish.”*

Among the statements that the author makes in this reference, it is important to stress the assumption on the complementarity of European and national identities. As a matter of fact, the literature review carried out by Oborune shows that the scholars are not unanimous in claiming that a European culture can exist without compromising with the national one, although the EU motto “united in diversity” might lead to a different view; as a consequence, her stance draws from the views of different authors (Hedetoft 1994<sup>17</sup>, 19; Sedláček 2009<sup>18</sup>; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003, 247<sup>19</sup>), whose opinion on the matter is diametrically opposed to that since, on the contrary, a strong European identity might as well be accompanied by a strong national identity. However, the actual scope of the research, which was the impact of the Erasmus experience on the sense of European culture and identity, has been reached through a survey directed to mobile and non-mobile students; the results of the survey have shown that, not only the Erasmus experience does affect the concept of European Culture and Identity in the students that partake in it (especially when compared to students who prefer not to), but also that this impact manages to reach the political sphere of these students. As a consequence, it is needless to say that, as Oborune stresses, “the programme is both a political tool and a social process”

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Rother, N., & Nebe, T., (2009). More mobile, more european? Free movement and EU Identity.

<sup>16</sup> Oborune, K., 2013. Becoming more European after ERASMUS? The Impact of the ERASMUS Programme on Political and Cultural Identity. *epiphany* 6. <https://doi.org/10.21533/epiphany.v6i1.60>

<sup>17</sup> Heikinen, M. 2009. “Estonianism in a Finnish Organization. Essays on Culture, Identity and Otherness”. University of Oulu.

<sup>18</sup> Sedláček, L. 2009. Bridging the Gap to the European Identity. 27th March 2009. Heinrich Böll Stiftung Prague <http://www.boell.cz/web/52-535.html>

<sup>19</sup> King, R. & Ruiz-Gelices, E. 2003. International student migration and the European „year abroad“: effects on European identity and subsequent migration behaviour. *International Journal of Population Geography* 9: 229-52. <http://sgo.pccu.edu.tw/GEOG/CHI/D/D1/D1A/D1A-1/19B--international.pdf>

and, as such, it is to be estimated in the dimension of its political impact outside of the mere educational or cultural sphere.

After having considered the contribution in literature concerning the “European Culture” and the role of the Erasmus + programme in promoting it, it is now crucial to develop a conceptual base for this research; for this reason, it is required to draw from the doctrine some analytical categories that will be later used as foundation for the purpose of the research and its conceptual framework. The first concept that will be a fundamental component of this research’s conceptual framework is drawn from Radaelli’s concept of Europeanization<sup>20</sup>, which is intended as:

*“Processes of (a) construction, (b) diffusion, and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things', and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU public policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures, and public policies”*

Starting from this first definition we can identify a first, although mainly institutional, definition of the process intended to be analysed in this research. As a matter of fact, by the means of the Erasmus + programme and the education policies implemented by the EU in the last decades, we could assist to a progressive mainstreaming of bureaucratic and administrative practices in dealing with the higher education system across Europe. Moreover, another valuable point raised by Radaelli is the focus on a bottom-up conception of the Europeanization process, meaning that it is more concerned with the domestic choices and policies as the starting point in research to assess the actual integration of the European approach. Overall, this first definition provides some systemic elements that provide a good foundation for the general stance of this research: from the mainstreaming of practices across European countries, to the development of shared beliefs, we can undoubtedly find such elements in the phenomenon analysed in this research.

However, it is still a limited view over the European integration process, as it does not consider the private actors’ stance (since in this research we need to consider them in relating to the European institutions via the project cycle management), especially when in programmes like Erasmus + they represent the final responsible for its effective implementation. This lack of insight in the role of private actor, which is also taken into account by the author, requires further integration by drawing from other categories and doctrines in this matter.

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<sup>20</sup> Featherstone, K., Radaelli, C.M. (Eds.), 2003. *The Politics of Europeanization*. Oxford University Press, Oxford ; New York.

Hence, this vision of the Europeanization process is to be integrated to the systemic category of multi-level governance, by drawing from Schmitter's definition<sup>21</sup>:

*“An arrangement for making binding decisions which engages a multiplicity of politically independent but otherwise interdependent actors – private and public – are at different levels of territorial aggregation in more-or-less continuous negotiation/deliberation/implementation, and that does not assign exclusive policy competence or assert a stable hierarchy of political authority to any of these levels”.*

This definition, that has also been adopted in an EU report<sup>22</sup> concerning cohesion policies in a multilevel governance perspective, can provide a first track in developing a view of the Europeanization phenomenon that can be applied to non-state actors in the framework of a programme like Erasmus +, where the contribution of public authorities is less crucial, if compared to that of NGOs or social enterprises.

As complementary to this view, it can be mentioned the contribution brought about by Hooghe and Marks<sup>23</sup>, who mention the neofunctionalist perspective towards the European integration process. As such it is stressed that:

*“Neofunctionalists identify a series of mutually reinforcing processes that lead to further integration. These include spillover among policies that are autonomous only in the short term; increasing reliance on non-state actors to implement such policies; a shift in citizen attachment towards supranational institutions; and as a result of each of these, more intensive exploitation of the benefits of trade and, more broadly, of interdependence.”*

With this regard, apart from the abovementioned integration of non-state actors, the integration of the concept of “policy spillover” is crucial in considering not only the opportunities coming from the Erasmus + programme in fields that are not proper of the higher education field, but also in considering non-state actors as fundamental players in the European integration process. In fact, this research is meant to highlight how the Erasmus + Programme does affect the involvement of the participants to the EU Agenda priorities, which are, indeed, connected with totally different policy areas.

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<sup>21</sup> Schmitter, Philippe C. (2004), Neo-neofunctionalism. In Diez, T. and Wiener, A. (eds.) European Integration Theory, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Directorate-General for Internal Policies, 2014. An Assessment of Multilevel Governance in Cohesion Policy 2007-2013. REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT 90.

<sup>23</sup> Hooghe, L., Marks, G., 2019. Grand theories of European integration in the twenty-first century. Journal of European Public Policy 26, 1113–1133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1569711>

Concerning the role of non-state actors in the policy process in relation to the EU institutions, it is remarkable the contribution brought to light by Sudbery's article<sup>24</sup> concerning the NGOs as change actors in the EU context; in this article, she brings the case study of the NGOs policy opportunities in Poland in terms of gender equality issues, which is not strictly connected with the specific topic of this research but makes use of analytical concepts that turn out to be comparatively very useful to comprehend and study the interaction between non-state actors and EU institutions in the framework of the Erasmus + Programme. For instance, Sudbery draws from Kriesi's doctrine the concept of policy opportunity<sup>25</sup> in the institutional dimension as either "exclusive" or "integrative"; in the framework of these two general categories, she mentions the resource of funding programmes (which is compared to other EU main resources, such as the directives, the regulations and the policy arenas in the case of the OMC), which is particularly suited to the analysis of the Erasmus + programme. Concerning the resource of the funding programmes, Sudbery claims that:

*"(It) encompasses the full range of Community programmes, including the structural funds, which finance projects and partnerships that contribute to the achievement of EU objectives and priorities. EU funding provides resource-poor civil society actors with the opportunity to access much needed financial resources. Moreover, by participating in EU projects, NGOs may develop experience of financial administration, learn from project partners and gain legitimacy in the eyes of the government. Usage of EU funding is therefore expected to empower domestic actors via the mechanism of capacity building"*

As we can see, Sudbery deems that the funding programmes are to be considered a resource that enables non-state actors to evolve in terms of competencies and overall legitimacy in order to have a clear role in the political system, a role that goes beyond the mere implementation of an EU policy. However, the conclusions drawn by the author imply that the funding programmes, although they do provide the financial opportunities to affect the policy process and enhance the economic opportunities of non-state actors with poor financial resources, do not provide the chance to move autonomously; as a consequence, the article conclusions concerning the funding programmes state that the NGOs studied would operate as change actors only on the terms and conditions set out by the EU priorities underlying those same programmes. This conclusion leaves little space for discussion, although it appears as too far-fetched; for this reason, in this research it will be put into discussion to

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<sup>24</sup> Sudbery, I., 2011. Spillover in a soft policy era? Evidence from the Open Method of Co-ordination in education and training. *Journal of European Public Policy* 18, 999–1015. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2011.599969>

<sup>25</sup> Kriesi, H., 2004. Political context and opportunity. *The Blackwell companion to social movements* 67–90.

what extent the terms and conditions set by the EU institutions (specifically in the Erasmus + programme) really affect the autonomy of the PMs taking part of the policy process.

Another important contribution comes from Polglase's analysis concerning the role of higher education<sup>26</sup> (and of the Erasmus programme in the specific European case) as a soft power tool often used to increase the degree of appreciation of certain values, policies, and even political actors; this study is set on the analysis of the consequences coming from the implementation of Higher Education policies in Belarus by the means of the Erasmus + Programme. One consideration is worth to be mentioned from Polglase's work, when it is claimed that:

*“The role of higher education is more than simply that of a soft power; it is a form of “transformative power” (Grabbe, 2006)<sup>27</sup> which has been used systematically by national governments, the EU and other bodies as a tool for Europeanisation”*

This aspect highlighted by Polglase refers to a conception of the Higher Education sector (and of the Erasmus + programme, as a consequence) as a means for spreading civic and political values, rather than just an end in itself. In fact, although the article concludes by stating that the specific case of Belarus did not bring ground-breaking results, it is still noticed that even slight intervention in the HE sector can put in motion grassroots movements inside the civil society concerning values and priorities that go far beyond the mere sector of education.

Another phenomenon that has been studied by the literature and that needs to be held in consideration is that of the Project Cycle Management (hereinafter referred to as PCM). As such, the PCM is described by Biggs and Smith<sup>28</sup> as:

*“A number of progressive phases that, broadly speaking, lead from identification of needs and objectives, through planning and implementation of activities to address these needs and objectives, to assessment of the outcomes”*

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<sup>26</sup> Polglase, G., 2013. Higher education as soft power in the Eastern Partnership: the case of Belarus 12.

<sup>27</sup> Grabbe, H. (2006), *The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanization Through Conditionality* in Central and Eastern Europe, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>28</sup> Biggs, S., Smith, S., 2003. A Paradox of Learning in Project Cycle Management and the Role of Organizational Culture. *World Development* 31, 1743–1757. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(03\)00143-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(03)00143-8)

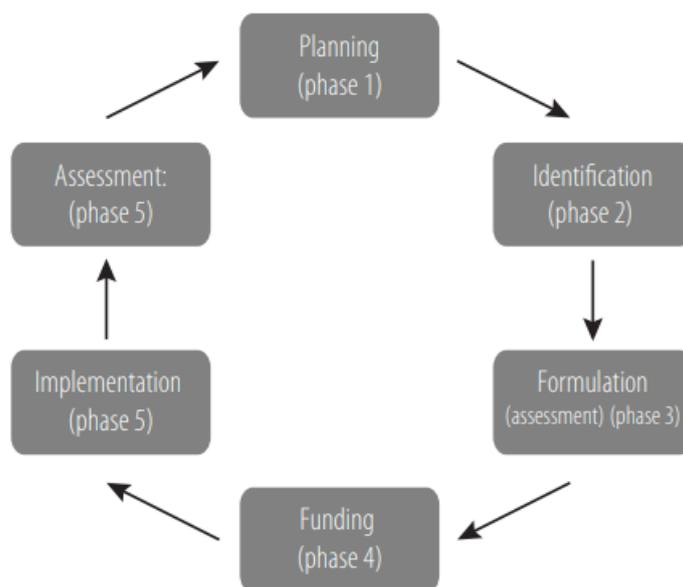


Figure 4 Graph portraying the Project Cycle Management

Source: Papadimitrov, R., Nikolovski, I., 2017. Handbook for Eu Project Design and Project Cycle Management 44.

Given the fact that the PCM represents one of the main constituting elements of this study, it is worth spending some time on defining the steps (which are shown in the Figure 4)<sup>29</sup> in the PCM that affect this research the most, in order to assess the actual value of the PMs intervention in an EU programme. For instance, the planning phase is certainly the one that amongst all the others must prove the value of the PMs in identifying an issue and developing an idea of project; this is certainly one of the phases in which the PM has not only a dialoguing role with the EU institutions, but also a responsibility in identifying issues and designing solutions that will be promoted and financially supported by the EU, since in this operation it all relies in the capacity of the PM to make an appropriate context study and to identify the most efficient alternatives to implement a certain amount of budget in order to positively affect that same context. Another crucial phase in this conception is the final one (evaluation), since it is not only the potential initiator of a brand new phase 1 (given the cyclical composition of the PCM), but also because in this phase the results and impact of the realised projects are assessed and pondered; the evaluation of projects turns out to be one of the main booster in a progressive improvement on both sides, as both the guidelines and the future projects themselves will look up to those projects that have carried out the best results or the broadest impact (the so-called best practices). With this regard, it is pointed out from Biggs and Smith that, although the scheme of

<sup>29</sup> Papadimitrov, R., Nikolovski, I., 2017. Handbook for Eu Project Design and Project Cycle Management 44

best practice does not always guarantee a transversal improvement of the quality of the projects, it is yet a practice that serves its purpose in guiding future initiatives.

The analysis of the literature in this specific field is with no doubt a starting point in delving within the analysis of the political dimension of the role of PMs. For instance, if we consider the bigger picture of the EU policy management, the PCM and the implementation of projects by the hand of the PMs is part of the bigger policy implementation phase at the EU level: in fact, in a dimension of Multilevel Governance, the role of the PMs is to effectively allocate the fundings of the given EU policy (in this specific case, the Erasmus + Programme) into concrete projects and, finally, outputs that would eventually be evaluated and assessed according to planned results and outcomes. For this reason, the role of the PMs in giving shape to the actual outputs of the Erasmus + Programme is crucial as a means of dialogue: as a matter of fact, the tools that the EU institutions use to maintain control over this phase of the EU policy making process are the guidelines set in the calls for applications and the bodies meant to monitor the actual delivery of the projects (in the case of the Erasmus + Programme, such bodies are the EACEA and the National Agencies)<sup>30</sup>; but, apart from these, the PMs have a certain autonomy in setting the specific outputs and products, as well as topics (implying that they still have to pertain to the field of action of the programme), for the projects they want to develop, as long as they are compatible with the eligibility criteria set in the calls for applications.

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<sup>30</sup> How Erasmus+ is managed | Erasmus+ [WWW Document], URL <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/node/2544> (accessed 7.19.22)

- Conceptual Framework

After having considered all the main developments in the literature concerning the various issues and categories that may concern this research, some concepts amongst all are to be considered for an operationalization; this is a fundamental step on this research in order to set the methodology, as well as the variables and hypotheses, required for this study:

- *Europeanization*: As main concept for this research, Europeanization is considered as the key phenomenon set to explain the trends on this research analysis. This concept, as it was taken from Radaelli's background definition, needed to be slightly extended in a neofunctionalist conception, in order to make it more inclusive and suited for the particular phenomenon put in discussion. In fact, the interaction among private actors, national agencies, and European institutions in the framework of the Erasmus + programme is undeniably a process that can be better understood and analysed by sticking to the variables and hypotheses set by the doctrine as for the matter of Europeanization, as long as they are properly integrated with other categories that fit the phenomenon studied and can as well be compatible with this concept.
- *Project Cycle Management*: This process will be a fundamental part of the research, since it represents the main input tool brought about by the applicants of the Erasmus + programme's calls for applications; this is due to the fact that all these actors ought to analyse the respective national contexts in terms of needs, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. As a consequence, the correct management of the Project Cycle would eventually lead to a clear picture of national, regional, or local contexts brought to the EU institutions and, hence, to an indirect interaction between them and the civil society. Moreover, a successful project submission does also have to fulfil the criteria set out by the EU Commission in the specific call for applications, making the Project development also a receptive process in both a local and supranational conception.
- *Policy Spillover*: By adopting the neofunctionalist approach, in the specific case of the Erasmus + Programme, it is more than appropriate to also mention the phenomenon of the "policy spillover"; as a matter of fact, considering the promotion of specific points and priorities of the EU Agenda in the framework of an Erasmus + project is, indeed, an application of this concept, as it applies to the fact that a programme meant higher education, professional training and student exchanges proves itself to also be a tool for promoting environmental, social or economic EU policies.

- Research Question, variables, and hypothesis

After having highlighted the main operational concepts that will be employed to develop variables, hypotheses and, more generally, the methodology of the research, it is now required to develop the Research Question (RQ), as a starting point for the analysis and as ultimate purpose of the study.

Concerning the RQ, it is stated as follows:

*“How do the EU institutions and the project managers affect the Erasmus + programme and the project developed under this programme in order to work as a channel for inputs regarding the European agenda?”*

The rationale behind this specific research question is that, considering the crucial role that the projects have in an efficient and effective implementation of the Erasmus + Programme, the PCM is necessarily a process that hides a more complex interaction between a source of inputs provided by the EU (eligibility criteria, and other formal and substantial requirements set in the calls for applications), and another source of inputs brought by the actual products realised by the hand of the PMs (since the whole implementation process is constantly monitored by the National Agencies, let alone the fact that the most successful projects are eventually mentioned by the EU as best practices). As a consequence, the levels of analysis (which will after constitute the base of the hypotheses formulated in this research) that underlie this RQ, we can identify three in total: the first one regards the top-down inputs provided by the EU institutions to the PMs via the means of the Erasmus + calls for applications; the second level, instead, regards the opposite direction, since it applies to the potential bottom-up inputs realised by the PMs in developing impactful and innovative projects for the Erasmus + programme with a specific and locally oriented approach; finally, the third level concerns specifically the relationship between the Erasmus + programme and the EU Agenda, since it is required to measure the mode and degree of influence of the latter on the former (both at the institutional and non-state level). However, if formulated in an appropriate manner, the hypotheses can integrate the third level of analysis in two main hypotheses that, respectively, cover the first two levels in a top-down and in a bottom-up conception.

This multi-layered approach to the RQ calls on an equally multi-layered formulation of both the variables and of the hypotheses; as a matter of fact, the dependent variable can be identified on the actual field of competence of the Erasmus + programme, since it is the field on which both the EU institutions and the PMs have an actual voice and role, although in different moments of its realisation. On the other hand, the two independent variables, if we want to set this research on both a top-down and bottom-up conception of the Europeanization phenomenon, have to be, as a consequence, the

intervention of the EU Commission in designing official documents and calls for applications and the projects developed under the Erasmus + programme. This set of variables will cover all three the hypotheses meant to be discussed during the research and data collection phases.

As a consequence, the variables considered to answer the research question and to set the methodology for the research are:

- *Dependent Variable*: the Erasmus + Programme's fields of competence and priorities.
- *Independent Variable 1*: the intervention of the European Commission in setting aims and requirements for the Erasmus + programme.
- *Independent Variable 2*: the intervention of the Project Managers in developing specific projects under the Erasmus + programme.

Once that the variables have been formulated, it is time to set the hypotheses that will be tested during the research and data collection phases. In the same way as the levels of analysis of the RQ have been set, so the hypotheses will be formulated and articulated: for instance, the first hypothesis will refer to the intervention of the EU Commission as a change actor in terms of the fields of competence of the Erasmus + Programme; the second hypothesis will refer to the intervention of the PMs as change actors in terms of the Erasmus + Programme's concrete impact. These hypotheses should take into account the double dimension of the policy spillover, on the one hand, and of the PCM as a tool that encourages to having a receptive learning process (both of the local context in which the PMs want to intervene, and of the criteria set by the Commission in the calls for applications).

As for their formulation, the hypotheses assumed for this research are stated as follows:

**H1:** “The EU Commission concretely promotes a shift in the content of the Erasmus + Programme towards a broader set of EU policies”.

**H2:** “The PMs concretely promote a shift in the content of the Erasmus + Programme towards a broader set of topics, both local and related to the EU”.

## *Methodology*

After having set the RQ, the different hypotheses and the variables meant to be monitored and assessed, it is apparent that the methodology meant to be set for this research is based on the top-down and bottom-up conception of the Europeanization process. In order to fully understand how the phenomenon can be explained, it is required to use different methods of analysis to assess the trends of this research; as a matter of fact, since the study is meant to assess a trend that goes in two directions (from the EU institutions to the Erasmus + Programme and from the PMs to the Erasmus + Programme), it is necessary to employ research tools that are fit for the two different targets and that are appropriate for the kind of information required for the purpose of the study.

For instance, the first method set to study this phenomenon (from a top-down perspective) is to gather any specific references to the fact that the European Commission includes in the Erasmus + programme some elements that might work in the purpose of promoting the European Agenda among the participants of the programme (hence, the PMs that submit the applications) and of the projects realised under the programme itself. The reference that will be collected must be taken from official documents issued by the EU Commission and concern specifically the Erasmus + Programme as such; this means that the research must be focused on those documents that set out officially the scope of the programme, the eligibility criteria of the projects submitted, or even the features that define a certain project as a “best practice” and, consequently, as a model for future projects. As a consequence, the main documents that will be studied to assess this trend will be the work programmes for implementation, the programme guides pertaining to the respective calls for applications and the annual reports that figure the main performances and the best practices carried out throughout the corresponding year; as for the years considered, we will pick an example of each category from the first year of the programme (2014) and the latest available until now (in the case of the annual report, the latest available refers to the year 2020).

As for the bottom-up perspective, the collection of data might encounter more difficulties; the reason can be found in the fact that it is hard to reach a sufficiently high level of coverage of the target group. This means that a purely quantitative/statistical method cannot be used to test the H2 concerning the PMs; as a consequence, two methods will be employed to assess any trends coming from the non-state actors’ initiative towards the European institutions:

- The first one is the administration of a questionnaire with both open and closed questions: the purpose of the former ones will be to construct a narrative and qualitative assessment of how

the relationship of the PMs towards both the European Commission and the EU Agenda works, highlighting the role of the PCM in this relationship; the second ones will be a helpful tool to construct a more quantitative trend, by assessing the degree of involvement of the target group in either the EU Agenda priorities or in the local and more particular priorities of their communities. The platform selected for this questionnaire to be administered is “EUSurvey”<sup>31</sup>: it is presented as “*an online survey management system for creating and publishing forms available to the public, e.g. user satisfaction surveys and public consultations.*”. As for the group targeted for this questionnaire, it will be addressed to project managers working for various kinds of institutions (public or private NGOs, social enterprises, non-profit organizations etc.) in different countries across the EU. For this purpose, the help coming from the social enterprise I have been working for during my internship (PRISM Impresa Sociale s.r.l.) will be crucial. The need to have respondents coming from different backgrounds both professionally and geographically is strictly connected to the need to gather quantitative results that reach a certain level of reliability; this would not be the case if the responses gathered will be too few or coming only from one country or one professional background. In case a sufficient quantity and diversity of respondents will not be reached, the closed questions will be considered much less in the data collection phase and the open ones will have the priority in being interpreted for the conclusions.

- The second, and purely qualitative, method that will be employed to study this phenomenon will be the case study of different projects to which PRISM Impresa Sociale s.r.l. has participated in or coordinated; the scope of this second method is to understand to what extent a project can be considered as resembling the European Agenda and in what terms do the projects have innovative power in bringing new themes and contexts to the EU. For this reason, the selection of projects that will be mentioned as study cases will move in two directions: firstly, the analysis of those projects that clearly depict an intention to promote specific EU priorities by the means of trainings or student exchanges; secondly, the analysis of those projects that are more aimed at portraying and promoting an issue that is not clearly considered by the EU, and that finds under those projects a way to be treated and addressed.

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<sup>31</sup> EUSurvey - About [WWW Document], URL <https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/home/about> (accessed 7.19.22).

## ***Findings***

### ***- Top-down dimension: The analysis of official EU Commission Documents***

This first part of the research, that concerns the behaviour of the EU Commission towards the Erasmus + programme, will be developed in more steps that will be concerned with different kinds of documents. What is more, in order to acknowledge any potential trends that have occurred since the official birth of the programme (which is to be set from the programming period 2014/2020, if we consider Erasmus + as a brand new identity of the previous Erasmus Programme) the documents analysed will be taken from the Erasmus + first implementation year and from the most recent period; this step might be crucial to assess if a policy spillover have actually occurred or if the intention of letting the Erasmus + programme be concerned with other policy fields was there since the beginning.

Firstly, let us take a look at the annual work programmes for implementation issued by the European Commission; this official document sets the priorities of the programme, the official budget and the management of the different key actions that would be run under the programme. It is needless to say, as a consequence, that this is the first kind of document that needs to be analysed in order to have a first clue on the nature of the Erasmus + Programme and of the intentions of the EU Commission as a change actor in this policy.

Starting from the 2014 work programme for implementation<sup>32</sup>, it is clear that as a document is mostly concerned with the operational features of the new-born Erasmus + Programme; this is understandable, given the fact that it was supposed to represent the synthesis of many other programmes that, in their totality, would have managed the same fields that from that moment would have concerned only Erasmus +. Nevertheless, it is still possible to have a look on some elements, references and features that can constitute a topic of discussion; for example, among the General objectives of the programme for the year 2014 it is mentioned “the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy, including the headline education target”. This definition might lead to think that the European Commission was planning on having the Erasmus + Programme include other EU policy areas among its objectives since the first work programme for implementation, although it is not that easy to claim in actuality. The “Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”<sup>33</sup> is a policy strategy realised by the European Commission in 2010 in order to achieve a sustainable growth impactful enough to recover from the previous years of economic and social crisis; for this reason it is almost apparent that the European Commission’s reference to the Europe 2020 strategy

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<sup>32</sup> European Commission, 2013. “2014 annual work programme for the implementation of "Erasmus+", the Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport”

<sup>33</sup> European Commission, 2010. EUROPE 2020 A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

should be intended as an inclusion of other policy areas in the Erasmus + programme so that it might enforce them from a perspective more concerned with youth, higher education, training and sport. However, if we take a closer look at the document of the Europe 2020 strategy, the Erasmus programme was explicitly mentioned as a channel for the empowerment of the Youth and Higher Education fields; this means that, although the “Erasmus programme” mentioned in that programme is not to be mistaken with the Erasmus + Programme of the programming period 2014/2020, it is still quite an ambiguous conclusion to link Erasmus + to the Europe 2020 strategy with the assumption that it refers to policy fields that go beyond the ones that are explicit competence of the programme, especially when considering that the work programme for implementation itself does not make any other reference to the green transition or sustainable development (it does mention the concept of sustainable development, but referring specifically to the field of higher education) amongst its priorities and actions. For this reason, the most logic conclusion to draw from this first official document is that no real policy spillover can be found, although the reference to the Europe 2020 strategy can be considered as a first trace of the intention of the European Commission to give a direction to the Erasmus + programme that is in synergy with broader policies.

The second work programme for implementation<sup>34</sup> that we will take a look at is the latest one recently issued, concerning the year 2022. This second document is of the highest importance for a comparative work, since it is not only very recent, but also concerned with the latest programming period (2021-2027); this means that we can witness a change in both the priorities of the programme and the political priorities of the European Commission. In fact, the difference between the two documents are apparent to say the least (regardless of the fact, that structurally speaking, the documents has kept the same structure without any visible changes); as a matter of fact, this document portrays an Erasmus + programme that sets standards for an overall improvement in the modes and ambitions of the programme itself, but most importantly it shows a clear connection and synergy with other EU and non-EU policies. This can be said since, amongst the general objectives of the programme for the year 2022, we can now find the commitment to contribute to reach the objectives set for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the objectives of the European Green Deal. This explicit commitment (that is more than once shown not only in trying to making more sustainable decisions in managing the projects, but also in trying to put the green transition as one of the main priorities of the Erasmus + programme in general) changes the overall perception of the programme in its relation to the European Commission and the EU Policy Agenda in general, since it is now

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<sup>34</sup> European Commission, 2021. 2021 annual work programme - “Erasmus+”: the Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport | Erasmus+ [WWW Document], URL <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/node/399> (accessed 7.21.22).

apparent that the Erasmus + programme serves, indeed, the purpose of being a channel for a general promotion of not only European values of culture and identity, but also of actual European policies and political priorities. In this sense, it is worth mentioning:

*“Erasmus+ will increase the number of mobility opportunities in green forward looking fields, i.e. those study periods abroad, traineeships, youth or classrooms exchanges, etc. which foster the development of competences, enhance career prospects and engage participants in subject areas which are strategic for the sustainable growth of our planet, with special attention to areas such as rural development, sustainable farming, management of natural resources, soil protection, bio agriculture, healthy oceans.”*

This reference leaves no doubt in assuming that the European Commission has intentionally set the green transition as not only a political priority of the Erasmus + Programme, but also as a proper and actual criterium in funding projects and mobilities; what is more, there is also a certain degree of specification for what regards the kinds of topics and the competences set to be enhanced by the experiences promoted via the programme. Finally, we can clearly see that, if compared to the mere reference brought about in the first work programme for implementation, the current document is way more affected by other policy areas and strategies; this means that, without any doubt, a policy spillover has indeed occurred throughout the previous programming period and up until now.

Another feature of this document that is worth mentioning is the reference to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (“Erasmus+ is therefore an important catalyst for achieving all Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)”), but most especially to the role of the Erasmus + Programme as an empowering instrument in the global scenario:

*“The programme offers a strong international dimension supporting the external dimension of internal policies and the EU’s external priorities. It strengthens societal links through enhanced mobility and education exchanges and capacity building, nurturing social resilience, human development, employability, active participation and ensuring regular channels for people-to-people cooperation and a stronger voice for Europe in the world.”*

This is a clear proof of how the literature has seen a true tendency in the Erasmus + being a form of “transformative power” on the one hand, as well as a “soft law instrument” for empowering the neighbouring relations on the other one.

After having taken a look at the work programmes for implementation for the years 2014 and 2022, it is now time to move forward to another kind of official document, which is a crucial element for this research: the official programme guides related to the respective calls for applications. This

document is undoubtedly one of the most important ones in tracing the link between the Erasmus + Programme and the projects implemented by the PMs; in fact, the analysis of these documents, this time, will be directed not only to the topics promoted by the programme guides (which will obviously reflect those already expressed in the work programmes for implementation issued by the European Commission), but also to those elements that enable the PMs to move across certain topics and fields when developing their projects: the award criteria. The award criteria are those criteria that give a certain number of points to the project submitted, the more you get and the more chances you can have to have your project funded; for this reason, it is crucial to trace the evolution of the Erasmus + Programme's award criteria from the first programme guide (2014) to the latest one available.

Starting from the programme guide of the call for applications of 2014<sup>35</sup>, we can clearly see that it reflects the parameters already set by the work programme for implementation: for example, the mention to the Europe 2020 strategy is still present and it does not have any further development in describing it as an objective; moreover, even in the programme guide there is no clear reference to the green transition or the sustainable development in a field that goes beyond the one of Higher Education. This aspect is not surprising at all, but it is still a valid foundation for what regards the award criteria: as a matter of fact, the award criteria in this call for applications are exclusively focused on the fidelity of the project objectives to the one expressed by the programme (which are exclusively connected to Higher Education, Youth, Training, Sport etc.) and on the overall quality and sustainability (referred to as the way of handling a resilient life cycle of the project itself after the end of the planned activities by the means of dissemination and exploitation strategies). As a consequence, it is apparent that the first call for applications in the framework of the Erasmus + Programme was almost totally concerned with the priorities of the programme itself, without any particular influence provided by other EU Policies and political priorities.

As for the latest programme guide<sup>36</sup>, we can notice the same changes that characterise the difference between the two work programmes for implementation. In fact, whereas in the 2014 programme guide we could not find any specific reference to the green transition and the environmental sustainability in the objectives, in the 2022 programme guide we can find plenty of them, along with two priorities that include the social inclusion and diversity, as well as the digital transition to the main features of the projects submitted. As reported in the guide:

*“The Programme supports the use of innovative practices to make learners, staff and youth workers true actors of change (e.g. save resources, reduce energy use, waste and carbon*

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<sup>35</sup> European Commission, 2014. “Erasmus + Programme guide – Version 3 (2014)”

<sup>36</sup> European Commission, 2022. “Erasmus + Programme guide – Version 2 (2022)”

*footprint, opt for sustainable food and mobility choices, etc.). Priority will also be given to projects that – through education, training, youth and sport activities - enable behavioural changes for individual preferences, cultural values, awareness, and more generally support active engagement for sustainable development. Therefore, organisations and participants involved should strive to incorporate green practices in all projects when designing the activity, which will encourage them to discuss and learn about environmental issues, to reflect about local actions and to come up with alternative greener ways of implementing their activities.”*

This excerpt taken from the section concerning the “Environment and fight against climate change” is worth being discussed about, since it does not only include the environmental issues as a main topic of the programme, but it also states that the discussion concerning the environment has to take place both with the participants to the various project and among the organisations that compose the partnerships managing those projects. This means that a high value is now given to the promotion of the green transition in the framework of the Erasmus + programme, at all levels. What is more, for each and every type of project under the key actions it is specified a specific environmental framework that fits to that kind of project. This means that, even if there are many different categories of potential projects that can be brought, for each of them the topic of green transition needs to be at least considered when attempting to submit a project.

For what regards the terms of the priority given to the environment-focused projects, the award criteria can provide even more clarity in understanding how this solution is arranged in managing the projects submitted. As a matter of fact, the inclusion of environmentally friendly and sustainable practices inside the project is included in a category of award criteria (“quality of project design”) that can provide a maximum of 40 points over a total of 100 points, and in some cases it may be included in other ones that can improve the overall amount of points to an even higher level (e.g., the category “relevance, rationale and impact” can give 30-40 points); these award criteria confirm the clue that an actual priority is given to all those projects that include sustainable practices or, in general, include the promotion of environmental sustainability in the activities or outputs proposed, let alone the fact that each project under the Erasmus + Programme must provide a proper dissemination strategy by the means of which a project’s topic and outputs are promoted even to those who have not participated in the actual activities, but can still make use of the outputs produced during the project.

The final set of documents that will be analysed in this research concerns the ex-post considerations brought about by the European Commission that concern the results and impacts of the project

realised under the Erasmus + Programme. These ex-post evaluations are fundamental to this research, since not only they provide a trace of what the European Commission has highlighted in the previous implementation phases of the programme in terms of topics, but it also provides some best practices that are mentioned in an official document. This kind of credit given to certain projects could give a preliminary clue concerning the H2, since it might be a kind of contribution that has set the trend for the following calls for applications.

As for the first annual report (2014)<sup>37</sup>, as expected, not much has been said regarding the green transition and the environmental issues, except a brief mention to the need to foster the creation of green jobs for the youth. Nonetheless, a project belonging to the category “Large-Scale European Volunteering Service Events” has been mentioned as a good practice: the project, called “Green Capital EVS” is the only project mentioned in the whole annual report to make explicit reference to the promotion of sustainability skills among young volunteers in the context of the nomination of Bristol as EU Green Capital in 2015. Of course, the exceptionality of this project does not count as a trend among the PMs in trying to set the green transition as a priority topic of the programme, but it could still be considered as a starting point in managing the Erasmus + Programme as a channel that connects with other policy field through the tool of training and capacity building.

Concerning the latest report available (2020)<sup>38</sup>, the situation is drastically different. As a matter of fact, although it is not referred to the call for applications analysed previously, it is still quite apparent the difference in relevance of topics that go beyond the field of education, training, youth and sport (especially the environment-oriented ones); this also confirms that the change in priorities realised by the European Commission has not happened all at once, but there has been a continuous and progressive spillover process in the framework of the Erasmus + Programme. In fact, this Annual Report, which is almost 3 times longer than the previous one, mentions in its incipit the green transition, digital transition and social inclusion and diversity, also including one best practice concerning sustainable food practices (the project mentioned is called “Enhancing Food Safety in the Mediterranean (FoSAMÉD)”). The concern with best practices is not only limited to the so-called “highlights” of the Annual Report, but they are also included in every section dedicated to each key action and for each specific type of project under those key actions; this is proof of how, throughout the years, the European Commission has provided more and more tools to enhance the opportunities for the PMs to realise innovative projects in crucial fields, but also of how the European Commission perceived the projects realised as an opportunity to improve their ex-post evaluations with concrete

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<sup>37</sup> European Commission, 2015. “Erasmus + Programme Annual Report 2014”

<sup>38</sup> European Commission, 2021. “Erasmus + Programme Annual Report 2020”

inputs realised during the implementation phase of the Erasmus + Programme. Another point that deserves to be put into consideration is the notably high amount, among the best practices mentioned, of project that tend to promote a specific policy fields: an example of this is the amount of projects concerned with sustainability and environmentally friendly practices, as a proof that the PMs are quite receptive of the direction given by the European Commission in setting this link between the EU Agenda and the Erasmus + Programme; moreover, the commitment of the PMs in realising this kind of projects results in an active promotion of the EU Agenda priorities in a top-down direction and, in case the projects have been impactful and efficiently managed, in an equally active promotion of the PMs' inputs (the project itself) from the European Commission in the Annual Report official document.

For what concerns the specific role of the projects and their nature in this process, in the next sections it will be treated in a more accurate manner.

- *Bottom-up Dimension: the EUSurvey Questionnaire results*

Regarding the bottom-up dimension of this research analysis, the tools used, as already said before, will be different and peculiar in their interpretation. As a matter of fact, the analysis of official documents, although it still refers to a qualitative, rather than quantitative, methodology, it is still concerned with official definitions and a clear stance on the meaning of certain terms and concepts; on the other hand, though, a qualitative analysis from a bottom-up perspective might require more caution and attention to the details, in order to not lose any valuable information from that. For this reason, the questionnaire realised on the EUSurvey platform was a necessary step in trying to approach the bottom-up dimension of this phenomenon. It is needless to say that it required a peculiar approach in order to provide concrete data, regardless of the amount of the responses; for this reason, the questionnaire is not composed of a big number of questions, although they are very specific in their content. This solution was deemed necessary in order to not make the experience of it a long and tedious clicking on a screen without actually putting thought into the answers given. As a consequence, although not many respondents have been reached in the timeframe at my disposal, I deem the answers received quite relevant in providing concrete feedback by those who actually participate in this dialogue with the European Commission by the means of the Project Cycle Management.

For what regards the nature of the questions, they focused on three main categories: a first set of questions concerned the Erasmus + Programme in general, the second set of questions focused on the Erasmus + Programme's eligibility criteria and, finally, the third and last set of questions covered the topic of Project development in relation to the EU Agenda, for a total of 12 closed questions and 3 open questions. The closed questions were overall structured as follows: after putting a scale of numbers from 1 to 5, it was asked to the respondents to attribute the degree of agreement to certain statements or, in the case of the last questions, the degree of influence provided from one or another actor or context in certain phases of the project development. The topics of the statements in the first set of questions concerned in particular some generic statements (both positive and negative) about the Erasmus + Programme in terms of main topics (in particular, pushing to consider the presence of the EU Agenda priorities among the programme's priorities), impact and resource-efficiency and overall usefulness in dealing with certain local issues; as for the second set of questions, the topic of the statements was even more specific in trying to identify the perception that the PMs have in dealing with the eligibility criteria of the Erasmus + Programme (e.g., assessing the degree of agreement on the fact that Erasmus + prioritizes those projects that reflect the EU Agenda priorities); finally, in the

third set of questions, where the open questions can be found, the focus was more concerned with assessing the degree of involvement of the PMs in the local issues as opposed to the EU priorities. The choice of opposing the concept of local issues to the EU Agenda priorities is intentional, since it directs the consideration of the respondents to ask themselves if there is a contraposition of the two concepts, rather than a partial or total overlap; this potential disruption of the original premise of the research (although it is to be considered as marginal in terms of the general purpose of the study) might lead to new considerations on both the role of the PMs in the EU political system and of the role of the Erasmus + Programme for both the civil society and the academia.

As for the general profile of the respondents, unfortunately it has not been possible to collect responses from outside of Italy, and even in that case only a minority of the respondents come from other structures apart from PRISM; this gives some difficulty in trying to interpret the responses in a transversal and international context, as it is in the case of the Erasmus + Programme and of the EU project management in general. Nevertheless, it is due to say that a Project Manager is still in a continuous dialogue with other Project Managers coming from other countries; this means that their experience is strongly influenced by the international context, which is a sufficient reason for at least trying to ponder the general attitude of the respondents towards the topic and questions proposed. However, with few exceptions, the responses collected in both the closed and open questions are quite homogeneous and coherent with a possible trend; in addition, the open questions have led to very interesting considerations concerning the development of the discussion around the H2 and the general purpose of the research.

Starting from the first set of questions, 5 out of 6 received homogeneous feedback from the responses, as a sign that there is an actual trend in conceiving the Erasmus + programme in general. In detail:

- To the sentence “Erasmus + enables private actors to concretely improve their respective local communities” the responses were all between 4 and 5, meaning that the trend was generally on agreeing to that statement.
- To the sentence “Erasmus + is exclusively concerned with topics connected to European citizenship and higher education” the responses were mostly between 2 and 1, with only one response with a value of 4, meaning that the trend was generally on disagreeing to that statement, with only one response off-trend.
- To the sentence “Erasmus + enables the Partnerships to implement projects specifically concerned with their local communities” the responses were mostly between 4 and 5, with two responses with a value of 2, meaning that the majority of respondents agrees to that

sentence, but the total number of respondents does not give clear clue on the homogeneity of the trend.

- To the sentence “Erasmus + is a useful tool to spread awareness on current events and topics (e.g., climate change, sustainable development, circular economy etc.)” the responses were mostly between 4 and 5, with only one response with a value of 3, meaning that the trend was generally on agreeing to that statement, with a minor factor of indecisiveness.
- To the sentence “Erasmus + is a useful tool to spread awareness among the local communities concerning crucial issues and challenges” the responses were mostly between 4 and 5, with one response with a value of 3 and one response with a value of 2, meaning that the trend was generally on agreeing to that statement, with a value off-trend and a factor of indecisiveness; in this case the total number of respondents does not give clear clue of the entity of both the indecision and the disagreement.
- To the sentence “Erasmus + brings impactful results in a resource-efficient way” the responses were totally scattered, with a maximum of only three respondents with a value of 2 and all the other values selected by at least one respondent; it is impossible to assess any kind of trend with this disposition of the responses.

The considerations that emerge from this first set of questions are many and varied. For instance, it is important to mention that the overall responses were to be either mostly or totally in agreement or disagreement with the sentences proposed, since it means that a trend can be identified in most of the responses and that it can be possible to make an interpretation from these responses (bearing in mind that the sample is not sufficient to state a general trend among all the PMs participating in the Erasmus + Programme). Apart from this, it is worth mentioning that the respondents mostly agreed to statements concerning the opportunities that the Erasmus + Programme provides in general (with a specific focus on the local needs of the partnerships, to which the respondents have also agreed), and disagreed to the statement concerning Erasmus + as a programme “exclusively” concerned with the topics of European citizenship and higher education; this leads to the conclusion that the PMs are overall well aware of the potentialities of the Erasmus + Programme, not only as a tool or funding programme, but also as a channel of specific political issues and topics. As for the statement that has received a critically heterogeneous response, the cause might be found in an ambiguous perception of the programme itself; this can be said since, indeed the programme is very promising for its very successful and efficient administration of funds, but it still is one of the programmes with the lowest amount of grants for projects, which means that not every kind of project can be carried out with the resources provided. However, any assumption concerning the results obtained from this question is to be considered as misleading and unproven.

For what regards the second set of questions, concerning the Erasmus + Programme's eligibility criteria, out of 4 only 2 can be interpreted, since one of them has received a heterogeneous response from the questionnaire participants and another one has received response from only half of the participants, making it useless to analyse it. In detail:

- To the sentence "The Erasmus + eligibility criteria are too strict to make really impactful results" the responses were mainly between 1 and 2, with 2 responses with a value of 3 and one response with a value of 4, meaning that there is a notable factor of indecisiveness and only one value off-trend; it would have been better to analyse these data with a higher number of respondents to better assess the entity of the factor of indecisiveness.
- To the sentence "The Erasmus + eligibility criteria let only the most suited project to be funded, in order to maximize the results of the programme without wasting economic resources" the responses were almost equally distributed between the values of 1 and 2 on one side and between the values of 4 and 5 on the other one; as a consequence, it is impossible to assess any potential trend.
- To the sentence "The Erasmus + eligibility criteria give advantage to projects that mostly reflect the EU Agenda's priorities" the responses were almost totally on the value of 4, with only one response on the value of 3, meaning that the trend is certainly on agreeing to the statement.
- To the sentence "The Erasmus + eligibility criteria give advantage to innovative projects, regardless of how much they reflect the EU Agenda's priorities" the responses were mainly between the values of 1 and 2, with only one response with a value of 5; however, only 5 of the participants to the questionnaire have answered to this question, meaning that it cannot be assessed any trend from such a low level of responses.

Compared to the first set of responses, the second one leaves much less to be considered. The second statement, that regarded the economic efficiency of the project funded by the Erasmus + programme, have brought responses that are quite similar to the last statement from the first set ("Erasmus + brings impactful results in a resource-efficient way"), confirming that the PMs do not have the same perception of the economic dimension of the Erasmus + programme, especially for what regards the general administration of the programme's budget. What is more, also the last statement's responses made it quite hard to have a clear interpretation of how the PMs perceive the Erasmus + programme in dealing with its main priorities; in fact, although the promotion of youth, higher education, sport, and training might be considered as an EU priority, it is something different from the promotion of environment and digitalisation, since they belong to different policy areas. However, given the very

lacking amount of data collected from that last statement, it is not useful to continue on trying to interpret the responses related to it.

As for the third, and final, set of responses, here we can find many hints for discussion since most of the questions are open and allowed the respondents to provide a personal contribution to the analysis, as well as a more articulated explanation on their position and previous answers to the questions. The only main shortcoming from this third set of questions is that one of the respondents have claimed to not know anything about the EU Agenda for the 2021-2027 programming period and to be only involved in the implementation of projects, rather than their actual development; this means that their contribution only covers their experience in dealing with the implementation of project and their perception of the topics they treated at a merely local level.

Starting from the first question, which was a follow-up of the question concerning whether the respondents are familiar with the EU Agenda for the 2021-2027 programming period, it said “Has this affected the content of the projects you have developed? If yes, please explain how”. The responses were very enriching, although they collided with an assumption made with the study; as a matter of fact, from this first open question many respondents claimed that the topics in the projects they developed were most certainly influenced by the EU Agenda, but also stressed that it did not feel as a constraint:

*“Every project I have ever written has been influenced by both the European Agenda and the specific call criteria. The European Agenda, in particular, is keeping pace with nowadays priorities like digital inclusion, green and blue economy etc.”*

This specific answer unveiled an overall receptive behaviour towards the directions set by the European Commission, both in the EU Agenda and in the specific calls realised for the Erasmus + programme; this kind of answer perfectly fits with the H1, since it stresses the fact that the implementation of the Erasmus + by the hand of the PMs is certainly also affected by the direction taken by the EU Institutions in setting the political agenda, but it also throws some shade on the H2, since it undermines the autonomy of the PMs in realising their projects, and through those set new trends inside the Erasmus + Programme. Another answer follows this same path, but focuses more on the eligibility and award criteria set on the Erasmus + Programme:

*“The EU agenda is simply a frame to take inspiration from. Project proposals may address all kinds of initiatives as long as their structure fits the standards and requirements of the E+ manual. You may write the most meaningful project of all, yet if you are not extremely concrete or if you*

*do not properly express necessary elements (for example quantitative and qualitative indicators) following the E+ manual, your project will just not be funded.”*

In this specific case, the H2 might be confirmed by the fact that, as this respondent claims, following the criteria set by the specific call is the minimum requirement to have a project being considered for funding. This means that the PMs do have enough autonomy to realise innovative project and address new issues, as long as they keep on following the minimum formal and substantial requirements set in the various calls for applications. On the other hand, one of the respondents briefly claimed that:

*“Yes. We try to meet the needs of our local communities with the priorities set by the Agenda.”*

This answer showed that for some of the participants it is also a matter of compromising between the specific local needs addressed and the priorities set in the EU Agenda; this does not mean that there is an actual constraint in doing so, but still there is a dialogue between these two dimensions in the phase of project development, and this dialogue does prove that the PMs have an active role in setting the modes and contents implemented by the Erasmus + Programme. However, another answer given by one of the participants provides a particular insight on the role of the PM as, on the one hand, an actor that finds in the Erasmus + programme a tool meant to provide funding for improving the development of specific target groups in a European dimension and, on the other hand, as an actor that serves the purpose of implementing a specific EU policy at the local level:

*“EU priorities always affect our proposals. We strongly follow (on a cascade model) the EU policies, the objectives and priorities of the eu programmes and those of the specific calls.”*

It is interesting in this case the explicit reference to a “cascade model”, since it gives a clear view of what the role of the PM would look like in a mere top-down perception of the Erasmus + programme.

However, for what regards the following closed questions, that concern the extent of influence of, in one case, the EU and local instances and, in the other case, the extent of influence of the national and the partnership’s context. In detail:

- To the question “on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 means being totally influenced by the local instances, and 5 means being totally influenced by the EU Agenda), to what extent are the topic proposed in your project affected?” the answers have given a totally symmetric result, with a majority of answers of the value of 3, and the same amount of responses equally distributed between 2 and 4, meaning that the trend is mostly set on the indecisiveness, with few deviations towards both the extents of the values.



from this study, since now it appears clear that the differences between the role of the European Commission and the Project Managers as change actors in the framework of the Erasmus + Programme do not lie in the specific contents proposed (since they basically overlap after a cautious look). Instead, it is necessary to see how the project ideas are implemented and where really lies the difference between the influence given by the EU Agenda and the influence given by the specific local contexts of the PMs' organizations and partnerships. For this reason, the next section will delve into some specific projects brought about by "PRISM Impresa Sociale s.r.l." in order to study the entity and extent of this difference among some practical examples that will be taken into consideration as study cases.

- *Bottom-up Dimension: Case-studies brought by PRISM Impresa Sociale s.r.l.*

Once the top-down dimension of the phenomenon has been duly analysed and pondered in the broader framework of this study, and the questionnaires' results have been collected and discussed, it is now the moment to move towards the last research method employed for this study. This last approach consists of picking some concrete projects, brought by the social enterprise for which I have worked (some of which were directly coordinated by it), as key examples of project that reflected more the specific local contexts, or needs, of the partnerships, in a comparison with those projects that were certainly meant to be promotion tools for the EU Agenda. For this reason, since it might appear complex to trace a line between the two categories without a proper explanation, in this section the case-studies analysed will be more than one for each category. For the first category, two projects in particular captured by attention for the specificity of their topics, it is the case of "ToC for You"<sup>39</sup> ("Theory of Change in community work with vulnerable young people in the Euro-Mediterranean region") and "BoCoTo"<sup>40</sup> ("Boosting Community-based Tourism and Youth Work for Global Sustainable Development"); both these project, although they both seem to be compatible with general objectives already promoted by the EU in general and by the Erasmus + Programme in particular, are characterised by some features that give a particular insight of the specific local contexts of those actors included in the partnerships that have developed them. As for the second category, instead, the kind of approach is strongly different in both the topic and the aim of the project: the project selected to represent this category are "EGD4CITIES"<sup>41</sup> ("European Green Deal for Cities") and "CICLO"<sup>42</sup> ("boosting the Circular eConomy skills of the EU services Labor fOrce"); in both cases it is strongly present the purpose of promoting a certain EU policy (the European Green Deal in the first case, and the Circular Economy Action Plan in the second one), which is less highlighted in the projects previously mentioned, in favour of a greater focus on a local need that was shared by the whole partnership.

Starting from "Toc for You", the aim of the project concerns the promotion and dissemination of the so-called "Theory of Change"<sup>43</sup>, which is defined as:

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<sup>39</sup> "ToC for You" official webpage available at: <https://www.prismonline.eu/toc-for-you/>

<sup>40</sup> "BoCoTo" official webpage available at: <https://www.communitybasedtourism.eu/>

<sup>41</sup> "EGD4CITIES" official webpage available at: <https://www.egd4cities.eu/>

<sup>42</sup> "CICLO" official webpage available at: <https://www.prismonline.eu/ciclo/>

<sup>43</sup> What is Theory of Change?, n.d. . Theory of Change Community. URL <https://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/> (accessed 8.2.22).

*“A comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It is focused in particular on mapping out or “filling in” what has been described as the “missing middle” between what a program or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired goals being achieved.”*

This particular theory is often promoted and used in the field of international cooperation; for this reason, it is important to mention that most of the partner countries that had taken part in this project were from the south Mediterranean and even from war zones (it is the case of a non-profit youth organization coming from Palestine and a Jordanian NGO). The particular traits of this project are, as a matter of fact, the inclusion of very specific needs coming from the partnership, the extra-European dimension of the project and, more importantly the aim of community development by calling upon a common feeling of belonging to the Mediterranean tradition. As it is claimed in the official webpage of the project:

*“The project targets community-based organizations (CBOs) that are young people-driven and work with/for vulnerable young people and children [...]. CBOs play a crucial role to enable young people to play a meaningful role in pursuing community development and social volunteering. Young leaders need to be supported to be able to identify the most important needs of their peers through comprehensive analysis, community mobilization and respond to them by designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating targeted programmes/projects based on the most effective good practices and methodologies.”*

The peculiar feature of the topic brought with this project (which is a KA1 in the field of youth workers' mobilities) is the stress on the promotion of grassroots community movements, as a way of promoting the local communities' initiative in tackling social issues in an effective way; for this reason, although it is apparent that this kind of topic belongs to the main objectives of the Erasmus + Programme, this project can be mentioned as an attempt of promoting bottom-up movements in a communitarian context inside and outside the EU.

As for the second project that I deem represents more the local needs rather than the EU Agenda, “BoCoTo”, it is a capacity-building project in the field of youth that aims at the promotion and dissemination of the so-called “Community-based tourism” (CBT) as a form of grassroots entrepreneurial initiative for the sustainable development of communities across the world. In fact, as it is said in the official webpage of the project:

*“Perspectives on CBT are explored through a holistic concept of protection and valorisation of biodiversity, cultural diversity, local development, promotion of human rights. Through an intercultural approach, the project engages youth organisations and stakeholders to work together to develop and promote CBT as a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable economic growth, youth employment, social inclusion, well-being and poverty reduction, while at the same time protecting cultural values and the natural heritage.”*

In this case we can see again how the topic *per se* could be included as belonging to the EU Agenda priorities or, in general, as one of the purposes of the Erasmus + programme. Nonetheless, it is apparent that in this specific case we are not talking about the explicit promotion of a European policy; this means that there is an overall intention of bringing up specific practices that, although also fitting with the EU Agenda, are more connected to a local and specific view and analysis, rather than to a top-down input perceived from the institutional level.

In general, as it also emerged from the questionnaires’ results, the difference in actual topics is hardly present when talking about project moved by specific local needs when compared to the general EU Agenda, which means that the actual difference between the top-down and the bottom-up dimensions of this phenomenon do not lie in the thematic content of the inputs realised. However, the next two projects, “EGD4CITIES” and “CICLO”, are characterized not only by a specific reference to EU policies in the topic (which already is a sufficient difference in differentiating the projects mainly influenced by the EU Agenda by those which are designed out of local needs and issues), but also the contents proposed in these projects show a certain difference in the approach towards the target groups to which these projects are directed.

Starting from “EGD4CITIES”, the project is directed to the local authorities’ staff, and it is aimed at disseminating and promoting the basic skills and knowledge pertaining to the European Green Deal. As it is written in the webpage dedicated to the project:

*“The project is meant to get involved local authorities which are in charge of a variety of environmental services related to noise or air pollution, waste disposal, consumer education and protection, or city planning which directly affect the health of local citizens and impact the environment. The project specific goal is to capacitate local authorities’ staff and NGO leaders for change engagement, developing green sectoral skills and fostering leadership skills, creativity, socio-educational and professional development, through Local Authorities’ and NGOs’ action.”*

As a matter of fact, this project is, hence, mainly directed to actors that exert a public power, which means that, although it is indeed oriented to a local dimension as well as the previous projects presented, it is set more on a top-down approach to the political system, rather than in a bottom-up approach. This can be said since the method of dissemination of this policy is not meant to stimulate grassroots, bottom-up and communitarian development; rather, it is more concerned with the PM having the part of an intermediary from the European level towards the local dimension. This approach is more in line with a reception and promotion of the EU Agenda to the lower levels of public policy implementation, rather than with a capacity building experience meant to provide critical thinking tools in order to start new trends.

Although it is meant with a different approach and target, in the “CICLO” project we can find a pretty similar approach; in fact, although in this case the target group is composed of vulnerable categories like low-skilled workers and long-term unemployed people, the method is quite similar in trying to disseminate skills and knowledge set by a European Policy; what is more, the same approach in promoting green practices has emerged as an explicit priority of the European Commission in awarding the fundings for the Erasmus + Programme. However, the project in detail regards:

*“To upgrade and multiply the opportunities for up-skilling and re-skilling to long term unemployed and low –skilled workers, in the field of evolving circular economy market, via innovative VET tools and pedagogies, accompanied by skills acquisition assessment, recognition and validation methods.”*

In this case, as we can see, the approach is quite similar to the one of the “EGD4CITIES” project even though the target group has changed: the project is once again a tool to reach a category of the civil society that has not been reached directly by the EU institutions, in a way that, via a top-down approach, they can understand and make use of the skills and knowledge related to a sector that the European Commission has an active interest in seeing developing.

After having briefly described these four study cases, a discussion is required in order to make a synthesis of the two methods employed for the bottom-up dimension of the analysis. For instance, we need to see how much the H2 has been confirmed and, conversely, how far we went from it after having collected the findings concerning the actual PMs’ behaviour in the Erasmus + programme. As a starting point, it has resulted in both the questionnaires and the study cases that, overall, there are no clear boundaries between a topic promoted in virtue of a local need and a topic inspired by a pondered analysis of the EU Agenda priorities; this means that, apart from the explicit reference to certain EU policies, the process of distinction between the two categories might be too shady to assess a clear trend in a direction rather than another. As a consequence, it might be too hard and far-

fetches to say that the PMs are directly responsible in setting the topics of the Erasmus + Programme's priorities; however, this does not imply that the PMs do not operate as change actors in general.

## ***Conclusions***

The literature review and the research analysis made in this study have brought to a number of considerations. For instance, from the literature many categories and fundamental research outcomes have been brought to light and basing on these it has been possible to realise a research project that was up to date with the preliminary considerations and has, without any doubt, brought some findings that would turn out to be useful for future research in this field. As a matter of fact, the concept of Europeanization and the preliminary definition brought by Radaelli gave a broad perspective in what could the possible outcomes of this research be; in fact, discovering that the PMs in the questionnaire have proven to be very receptive of the European “*formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things', and shared beliefs and norms*” and, as a consequence, very committed to a European stance in developing projects for the Erasmus + programme, has been a discovery and an important additional piece in the collection of results during this study. What is more, if we consider the integration of the Neofunctionalist approach and of the spillover phenomenon to the concept of Europeanization, we can clearly see that the study has got great benefit from it; in fact, the integration of the non-state actors’ intervention in the framework of the Erasmus + Programme, as well as the expansion of the programme’s priorities to other policy areas, have properly served the purpose of broadening the field of analysis of both the programme and of the actors that participate in its development and implementation, at all levels. In the case of the Neofunctionalist approach, we have proven the importance of setting the dialogue between EU institutions and Project Managers as the hermeneutic cypher of the whole phenomenon; whereas, in the case of the policy spillover phenomenon we have seen how both the European Commission and the Project Managers that take part in the Erasmus + Programme have an active role in broadening its aim from the fields of Youth, Training, Higher Education and Sport to other European policy fields. These two categories have, finally, not only helped in clearing the overall multilevel system of the Erasmus + Programme as an EU policy, but it has also helped in setting a schematic and overall exhaustive methodology for trying to find a response for the Research Question by the means of the two hypotheses realised and the variables used to interpret the trends underlying this phenomenon. However, it is now time to review the two hypotheses set for this research and assess to what extent they have been confirmed or confuted.

- H1: “The EU Commission concretely promotes a shift in the content of the Erasmus + Programme towards a broader set of EU policies”.

Starting from the first hypothesis, that has set the initial discussion on a top-down perspective, by focusing on the specific behaviour of the European Commission, the findings have been exhaustive and overall positive in terms of demonstrating the H1. For instance, the choice to assess the official European Commission documents that set the main priorities and criteria for the Erasmus + Programme’s implementation has provided a fruitful soil for the required analysis. As a matter of fact, the documents analysed (work programmes for implementation, programme guides for the calls for applications, Annual Programme Reports) and the timeframe considered, by picking the first and the most recent document for each category, have provided a great amount of useful information in trying to assess not only the actual intervention of the European Commission as a change actor, but also the degree and the impact of such intervention throughout the years; in this sense, it has been crucial the fact that the latest documents all belonged to the current programming period (2021-2027) (whereas the birth of the Erasmus + Programme, as unification of the first Erasmus Programme and other EU Programmes, has taken place at the beginning the last programming period, 2014-2020), since the change in the EU Agenda was certainly more impactful throughout two different programming periods rather than throughout one single programming period.

For what regards the actual findings, it has been an enriching study under many perspectives. As a matter of fact, all the three sets of documents have all showed a measurable change in both the approach to the priorities of the Erasmus + Programme and to the Programme itself; in fact, the close focus on the peculiar elements that unveiled the way the European Commission has managed those documents (concerning the setting of the priorities and eligibility and award criteria, as well as the highlights of its *ex-post* evaluation) has showed the extent to which such change, in a spillover context, has happened: starting from the inclusion of the Environmental issues, social inclusion and diversity and digital transition as new priorities to be included in the Erasmus + Programme, it is clear to see that the European Commission has had an active role in including in the programme a further aim, which is to promote not only the sense of European values and citizenship, but also the EU Policies as horizontal priorities that need to be promoted and disseminated; furthermore, this change in the Erasmus + Programme’s priorities has reflected in an explicit inclusion of those policy fields as eligibility and award criteria inside the calls for applications (as it is proven in the comparison between the 2014 and 2020 programme guides), let alone the explicit reference to actively promote those policies in a pure top-down conception of the EU policy process.

As a general conclusion drawn from the analysis pertaining to this first hypothesis, it is more than confirmed that the European Commission has apparently included other policy fields inside the framework of the Erasmus + Programme, encouraging to produce a spillover effect from the fields of Youth, Training, Higher Education and Sport to a broader context of Sustainable Development in a social, economic and, especially, environmental dimension.

- H2: “The PMs concretely promote a shift in the content of the Erasmus + Programme towards a broader set of topics, both local and related to the EU”.

Coming to the second hypothesis, realising a reliable method of bottom-up research has been more difficult if compared to the method used for the H1; as a consequence, it has been necessary to have a double approach that aimed at studying both the behaviour and the products realised by the hand of the Project Managers. This double approach allowed to have a close look at what is the final output of the Erasmus + Programme (which can also give a clue of how impactful is the role of the Project Manager in implementing it) and, on the other hand, to have a glimpse of how the Project Managers perceive themselves and the work they do both in relation to the programme and in relation to the European Commission and its Agenda. The first method employed to study this bottom-up dimension (the questionnaire) has provided, although with some limits in its administration and general reach of the target group, insightful considerations vis-à-vis the role of the PMs and their perception of the influence of the EU Agenda in the topics they propose through their projects. The first conclusion went to create a gap from the hypothesis formulated and the reality: this is said because the respondents to the questionnaire do not feel to have a role in what the content of the Erasmus + Programme might be in the future; what is more, the respondents also stressed that the influence of the EU Agenda in the topic proposed when developing a project is not necessarily a disruption of the contents they intend to propose. In addition to this conclusion, the questionnaire also highlighted how the topics proposed in the projects are overall similar, regardless of the local or European stance adopted to develop them; as a result, this conclusion threw some shade on the initial expectation to observe a trend of change promoted from the work carried out by the Project Managers, but also provided a new point of view to understand the actual difference between a project realised as a mere dissemination of an EU policy and a project realised as a way to tackle issues that gather partners from different parts of Europe (or even outside of Europe in certain cases) according to common features and needs.

This new perspective given to H2 has been deeply developed by making a comparison between four study cases taken amongst the various projects realised (or partaken) by “PRISM Impresa Sociale s.r.l.”. In fact, the study cases picked and analysed portrayed a context that is coherent with the results drawn from the questionnaire’s results. The first two projects taken to be discussed and analysed (“ToC for You” and “Bo.Co.To.”) are, indeed quite connected with both the Erasmus + priorities and, more broadly, with the EU Agenda; nevertheless, the real features that unveil a difference with other European Projects under the Erasmus + Programme are characterised by a more local approach in

implementing them: if we take a look to both the partners that have participated to the project and the general aim of the “ToC for You” project, it is apparent the aim to disseminate and promote a practice (in this case, the approach provided by the Theory of Change) that is strongly beneficial for developing communities; as for the case of Bo.Co.To. this peculiar feature is even more stressed, given the fact that this specific project is concerned with a practice, the community-based tourism, that can be greatly beneficial for communities that might have a great development coming from the tourism-sector, which is a field in which Sicily is particularly developed, which means that this particular local stance is promoted via a transnational network that goes way beyond the borders of the European Union. On the other hand, the last two projects picked as examples of a particular influence exerted by the EU Agenda on the project dimension (“EGD4CITIES and CICLO”) do have in common with the aforementioned projects the compatibility of the topics with both the EU Agenda and, especially after the already mentioned change in its priorities, the Erasmus + Programme; nonetheless, as we already have noticed, the real difference lies on the approach used to disseminate and promote certain topics: for instance, “EGD4CITIES” is quite clearly a project that refers to a successful dissemination of knowledge and useful information concerning the European Green Deal towards the Public Administrations’ staff and the NGOs, since it adopts a top-down method in making the local and non-state actors aware of an already existing policy and letting them be part of its implementation process; on the other hand, CICLO is more concerned with promoting entrepreneurial skills and knowledge in the field of circular economy towards long-term unemployed or low-skilled people, but still it is without doubt to say that the project *per se* is aimed at enhancing the impact of a specific EU Policy (in this case the Circular Economy Action Plan), as well as the European market in a field that was, and still is, receiving a particular stimulus by the European institutions.

As a consequence, given the results drawn from the two methods employed to demonstrate the second hypothesis pertaining to the bottom-up dimension of the phenomenon under study, it might be hard to force the analysis into a positive outcome. As a matter of fact, the hypothesis of the PMs operating as change actors in dealing with the priorities set in the Erasmus + Programme has been undoubtedly confuted. However, the considerations collected during the study of this second hypothesis have brought to some fields on which the research should focus for further studies. These final considerations will be further developed and pondered in the next section.

- *Final Remarks and Considerations*

Regardless of how much the two hypotheses set for this study have been demonstrated or confuted, there is no doubt in claiming that both of them have opened new avenues for further research in both the fields of Europeanization and in the field of the Project Cycle Management as part of the Europeanization process. As a matter of fact, the introduction of the Erasmus + Programme, which is one of the main flagship initiatives of the European Union, as a means for policy spillover is certainly a decisive element in the study of the European political system: this is due to not only its historical value as an EU programme, but also to its significant and steady growth in both number of applicants and overall budget provided by the European Commission.

On the one hand, the deep study of all the European Commission documents done during the research analysis have a great value in shifting the original role of the Erasmus + Programme: from a mere flagship initiative meant to encourage the free mobility across the European Union and as a booster for the values of European citizenship and culture, to a broader and more crucial role in setting the field for a fruitful dissemination and promotion of the European Priorities in policy fields that go beyond the main Higher Education system, as it also brings a meaningful impact in geographical areas and amongst non-state actors that would not have any possibility to actively participate in it. In fact, if we consider how valuable is to push the small-scale partnerships in dealing with the green transition and the use of digital technologies, it is undoubtedly clear that such a Programme has a role in pursuing certain EU objectives that is no less than the one taken by structural funds like the ERDF, even if we are talking of a great gap in budget and substance of their implementation between the two funding programmes.

On the other hand, it must be taken into account that the second part of the research analysis, connected with H2, has not brought the expected results; this outcome of the research undermines the actual role of the Project Managers in dealing (individually and via partnerships) with the changes happening inside the framework of the Erasmus + Programme and of the EU Policy Agenda in general. As a matter of fact, dealing with such an outcome might lead to a conception of the Project Management as a merely passive execution of rules that is, if needed, duly adapted to the specific needs of the local communities, yet firmly sticking to the EU parameters and requests. This point of view, given the findings carried out by this second part of the research analysis, turns out to be erroneous: in fact, the study cases analysed have brought a change in the point of view of this study, leading to a conception of the Project Management that, undoubtedly, sticks to the EU parameters in being designed and implemented, but that also is greatly concerned with the local communities and

their development. This conclusion, considered along with the fact that the questionnaires' results have brought a sort of overlap between the local instances carried out by the PMs and the European Commission, leads to a new avenue inside the field of research of the Project Management itself. This new lead brings new valuable insight into the analysis of the behaviour of project managers in implementing the Erasmus + Programme as a booster for both the European Culture and the EU Policy Agenda, since their role in designing the modes and procedures to implement the programme can have a variety of possible outcomes inside the local communities in which they intervene; for this reason, assuming that the importance of the PMs' role can only be highlighted by the originality of topics proposed in spite of the EU Agenda (which was a preliminary assumption of this study) is certainly misleading, since it does not give place to assess how much the PMs' intervention is actually valuable in giving a peculiar shape to the European dimension when brought to the local level. As a consequence, the confutation of the second hypothesis can most certainly be a starting point for further studies around the way the PCM methodology used by the Project Managers is actually a crucial variable in assessing the implementation phase of the whole EU policy process; moreover, having highlighted this peculiar trait of the PCM inside a programme that does not have much funding if compared to greater European structural funds (although it does have a trait of internationality that gives much importance to the international networking and the exchange of good practices) is a crucial step for a potential start in broader fields of analysis that pertain to the PCM and its relevance in giving shape to the EU policy process.

To conclude, the study carried out concerning the Erasmus + Programme, its connection with the European Commission and the EU Agenda in general, and the role that the Project Managers serve in this programme via the design and implementation of their projects, has brought to light less answers than expected: it has undoubtedly highlighted the political role, already studied and analysed by previous authors in the literature (although not under the perspective of a policy spillover), of the Erasmus + Programme in disseminating and promoting EU Policies and priorities; however it has not met the expectations in unveiling the potential of the Project Managers' role as change actors in its implementation phase. Nevertheless, although it has not provided the expected answers, it has also brought to light many questions that should be considered in further studies that pertain to the evolution of the European integration process and the role of non-state actors in developing it autonomously with the financial support of the EU funding programmes; this fresh point of view might be a turning point for future developments in both the academia and the professional field of those non-state actors that actively work with the project management, given the importance of tracing a *fil rouge* that connect Project Management and Policy Agenda under a unique structure that promotes and multiplies the impact of the European integration process at all levels.

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