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First Erasmus, now Amicus THE CASE FOR A EUROPEAN- LEVEL UNIVERSAL CIVIC SERVICE

The idea of introducing a form of civic service has been making headway throughout much of Europe. Some European countries have already implemented some form of service for young people: these services can be either compulsory as in Germany (as part of the national service) or voluntary and nevertheless very successful in terms of the number of participants, as in Italy. Some other countries are actively considering implementing similar projects: Belgium and the United Kingdom have initiated an ambitious public debate on this issue.

This is also true of France, where the idea of introducing some form of civic service has been endorsed by all the major candidates in the 2007 presidential election. Ten years ago, the French President's decision to abolish military service received widespread support throughout the country. Today, however, the vast majority of citizens agree that France needs to restore a civic sense, re-establish social links that have been unravelling and increase social mixing among French youth. An ambitious and universal civic service would serve that goal well.

With the public debate on a civic service now developing all over Europe, the Institut Montaigne is convinced that this trend represents a unique opportunity for European youth and for Europe as a whole: giving all young Europeans participating in a civic service at national level the opportunity to complete their service in another European country would dramatically increase the benefits

for youth while also contributing to building lasting bridges between Europeans. By systematically introducing a clear European dimension into national civic services, one could obtain the same advantages as those provided by existing civic services at national level, while also building a very powerful tool for closer European integration.

This is the goal of the AMICUS project.

Amicus: a vision for a European civic service

AMICUS is an acronym for "Association of Member States Implementing a Community Universal Service".

The goal of the AMICUS initiative, as put forward by the Institut Montaigne, is to trigger a chain reaction in the European countries

and the European institutions (especially the European Parliament and the European Commission). The momentum built up in this way should eventually lead to the definition of a common framework for civic services across the European Union. This framework would rely on the existing national civic service infrastructures and would permit the large-scale exchange of participants between countries and give birth to a truly universal European civic service.

Current youth exchange programmes in Europe (be it the European Voluntary Service or the Erasmus programme, which is limited to university students) involve only a very small proportion of European youth. This small percentage is not enough to attain critical mass and give visibility and influence to youth mobility in Europe. Moreover, these programmes are primarily targeting young people who would

« The core idea of the AMICUS project is to define a common framework for national civic services across Europe within which each Member State would be able to define its own version »

in any case have the opportunity to study or live in another European country. Unfortunately, they are not targeting those who would most need it but who do not necessarily have the financial and/or educational qualifications to do so (i.e. young people without a university degree or those living in poor neighbourhoods).

AMICUS, on the contrary, aims at expanding the horizon of all young Europeans and offering them new opportunities for completing their civic service. The introduction of a European dimension into national civic services would dramatically increase the attractiveness of the period of service (be it compulsory or voluntary). The participants would benefit much more: they would have the possibility of discovering new cultures, boosting their self-confidence and increasing their marketability thanks to the international experience acquired. Learning a foreign language, which is the key requirement for international mobility, is of course another important benefit. On average, only half the European population speaks a foreign language, but this figure hides dramatic discrepancies: in Denmark or Sweden, 90% of the population speaks another language, while only 30% of the British population does so.

Year after year, AMICUS would contribute to reinforcing the sense of common purpose among European youth and give concrete content to the notion of European citizenship. This does not contradict the stated goal of most civic services, which is to reinvigorate the sense of belonging to a national community, because the AMICUS framework respects the choices made by each Member State regarding the forms of national civic services and their curriculums.

For all these reasons, the Institut Montaigne is convinced that the launch of a European initiative aimed at all young Europeans would be a splendid way of addressing the need for projects capable of mobilising public opinion. As initiatives concerning national services multiply across Europe, this opportunity must be seized!

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The AMICUS initiative is built around existing infrastructures for national services. In no way does AMICUS intend to impose a standard format for civic service upon all Member States. This last approach has been tested in the past without success. Traditions and national specificities are too strong

for a “one-size-fits-all” approach to get any traction.

The core idea of the AMICUS project is to define a common framework for national civic services across Europe within which each Member State would be able to define its own version. This would be a good way of leveraging the complex infrastructures that have been developed in several European countries.

The AMICUS framework would guarantee full interoperability between the existing national civic services and be a catalyst for international exchange of participants. Technical complexities are today a significant obstacle to the development of international forms of civic services. These range from lack of mutual recognition of past experience and qualifications to issues regarding health insurance coverage or pensions. They need to be addressed systematically.

The main characteristics of the common AMICUS framework could be the following:

- a universal service, meaning that the service would be targeted at (almost) all the members of each age group (male and female)
- a “civic” service, i.e. civil or military in character

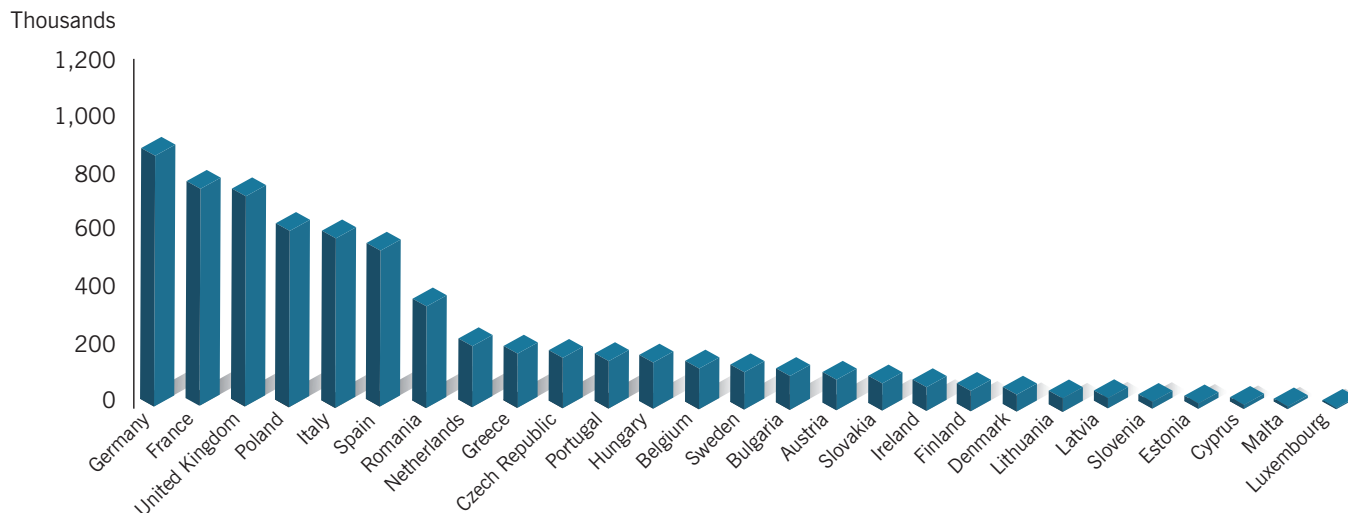
Civic services in five European countries¹

	France	Germany	Italy	Czech Republic	Poland
Percentage of youth aged 15-24 in the total population, 2002	13%	11,4%	11,4%	14,6%	16,9%
Number of young people aged 19 in 2002	772,600	939,500	660,200	149,600	654,000
Number of COs ² / performing civil types of national service	26,332 (1999)	10,200 (2003)	85,000 (2003)	48,500 (2002)	No figures but few in number
Number of volunteers in state programmes	3,601 (2002)	17,800 (2003)	15,000 (2003)	0	0
Annual percentage of young people involved in civic service activities	3.8%	12.8%	15.14%	32.4%	Negligible

¹ Source: Youth Civic Service in Europe, Association of Voluntary Service Organizations Research Report, 2004 – www.avso.org.

² COs: Conscientious objectors

AGE-GROUP SIZE IN MEMBER STATES, 2005



→ a service that could be carried out between the ages of 16 and 28, on the initiative of the interested party

→ a service that would comprise a strong European component (meaning that as much as possible of the service period would be completed in a country other than that of the participant).

The scale of such a service would bear no comparison to that of the systems currently in place. AMICUS would potentially concern the whole of a European age group (that is to say approximately 6 million young people) and would therefore represent a multiplication by one thousand of what is currently achieved through the European Voluntary Service. This would of course imply a major financial investment: assuming an annual cost of 10,000 euros per participant, the budget for the AMICUS project would be around 60 billion euros. With a less ambitious assumption (i.e. a six-month service period and a 50% participation rate), the estimated budget would be close to 15 billion euros. Part of this sum

is already being spent by Member States on existing forms of civic and military service. Under the AMICUS framework, Member States would bear the main cost of the civic service at the national level, while the European Union would pay for co-ordination expenses, some forms of incentives and possibly cross-subsidies between countries.

It is therefore clear that AMICUS' implementation will require strong and lasting political leadership. Key players in putting AMICUS on the European agenda will be the countries about to preside the European Union: if Germany, Portugal and Slovenia take the lead in establishing AMICUS' foundations, the French presidency, in the second half of 2008, could have a decisive role to play in the implementation of this project, which will certainly take several years to reach its cruising speed.

Discussing the AMICUS framework would spark valuable debates across the Union, as a European civic service is a subject that is likely to mobilise public opinion. As truly pan-European debates have until now been close to

non-existent (this is true even for the debate on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005), AMICUS could be the occasion to give rise for the first time to a true European public debate.

Illustration: what would a French version of the AMICUS look like?

In order to illustrate the AMICUS concept, it might be useful to describe how this project could be implemented in a country where there is currently no compulsory form of service and where the different forms of voluntary service remain limited, i.e. France.

The French context

In France, the abolition of national service was announced in 1996, to general satisfaction. After a few years however, it turned out that this abolition actually created a certain vacuum. To try to fill this vacuum, several initiatives for a non-military national service were

put forward. These initiatives were brought to public attention, especially after the riots that erupted in disadvantaged suburbs towards the end of 2005 (*"la crise des banlieues"*). Various opinion polls show that public opinion is now largely favourable to the introduction of some form of civic service. The idea was included in the programmes of the main candidates for the 2007 presidential election.

The arguments generally put forward in favour of this non-military national service, which have been detailed in several reports (in particular the report by Admiral Béréau for the *Conseil d'Analyse de la Société*), are the following: the possibility of rediscovering certain fundamental values of our society (good citizenship, civility, etc), the need for, and considerable benefits from, social and cultural mixing and, finally, the satisfaction of social needs currently ignored for lack of financial resources. (These different objectives are emphasised more or less, depending on the standpoint of each speaker.)

As in other countries, there has been very animated debate in

France on whether this civic service should be voluntary or obligatory in character. This opposition is often used as a pretext for inaction. To get rid of this polarisation and to move forward, the Institut Montaigne proposes framing the discussion in terms of the level of ambition which one wishes to give to the civic service (rather than the binary compulsory/voluntary alternative) and by defining incentives that would make it possible to reach this goal. One can indeed imagine a wide range of measures making participation in the civic service more or less attractive.

In any case, the implementation of a civic service will naturally have a cost for society. It is a major expenditure (estimated at about 3 billion euros for France, which approximately corresponds to the budget of the Ministry of Justice), which should be considered as an important and useful investment for the future.

Implementing AMICUS in France

In order properly to take into consideration the current French situation and to identify the operational difficulties that will arise when AMICUS is implemented, the Institut Montaigne has conceived an arrangement that seeks to reconcile the benefits of the universality of an obligatory service with the satisfaction of achieving a task that is chosen “freely”, something generally associated with voluntary participation.

This is why the French implementation of AMICUS would comprise two distinct periods: an initial three-month period that would be compulsory for all young

people in a given age group and a voluntary period of 6 to 18 months that would be based on a task to be chosen from a large and attractive range of possible activities. The obligatory period would be carried out close to the participant's home and would include basic civic education, as well as one or several tasks in the general interest. The voluntary period, in accordance with the ambitions of AMICUS, could be carried out abroad, in another country taking part in the AMICUS project.

Taking into account the number of young people concerned, the implementation of such a system will require rigorous organisation. It will require flawless logistic support at the national level, and in particular the installation of a specific administrative structure that would be responsible for the call-up of the young people in each age group, the “distribution” of tasks and duties, as well as the follow-up. This structure will also have to ensure the homologation of the participating organisations (where the different tasks are being performed). Furthermore, the smooth functioning of AMICUS implies the creation of a permanent small-scale organisation at European level to ensure the necessary co-ordination between the participating countries.

Three proposals to trigger further debate on AMICUS at the European level

AMICUS is undoubtedly an extremely ambitious project.

For some proponents of a universal European civic service, the installation of a wide-ranging civic service in each Member State is the first priority on which to focus today.

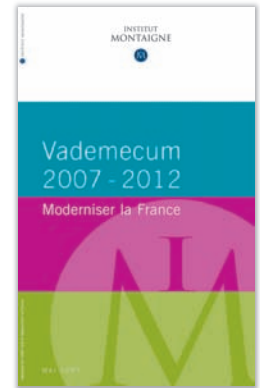
The Institut Montaigne believes, on the contrary, that the European dimension must be taken into account from its very inception, as it dramatically enhances the benefits that the young participants, the Member States and Europe as a whole can derive from civic service.

Furthermore, just when we are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, AMICUS deserves to be studied in depth and discussed at European level, because it has the potential to revive the momentum of European integration and to forge genuine European awareness.

This is why we put forward the following three proposals:

- 1. Integrate the European dimension in the on-going debate in France and in other Member States on a civic service.**
- 2. Launch a policy initiative at the European level on the definition of a common reference framework for all forms of civic service that would permit mutual recognition and allow full mobility of participants across the participating countries.**
- 3. Make the implementation of AMICUS a priority of the forthcoming presidencies of the European Union.**

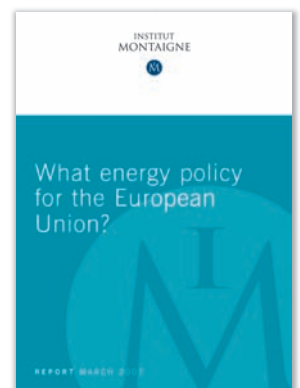
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