



21.9.2021

## NOTICE TO MEMBERS

**Subject: Petition No 0681/2021 by Jonathan Hassel (German), on behalf of ERASMUS by Train e.V., on free Interrail passes for all ERASMUS students**

### 1. Summary of petition

The petitioner explains that alone in 2018/2019 over 350.000 students travelled within the framework of ERASMUS+ in other countries but in most cases, travel expenses needed to be covered by the student himself. As airlines offer much cheaper tickets than rail operators do, almost 75% of the students took a flight instead of the train. This behaviour was even reinforced by the ERASMUS student network (ESN) which has reduction agreements with Ryanair and Qatar Airways. According to the petitioner, this situation led to the following problems: 1) As aviation contributes massively to CO<sup>2</sup> emissions, the ERASMUS+ programme supports climate unfriendly and does not foster sustainable travelling; 2.) If sustainable travelling is more expensive, especially poorer students cannot afford it which contradicts the spirit of the ERASMUS+ programme, i.e. equal chances and inclusion; 3.) If the ERASMUS+ programme acts against the EU's goals to combat climate change, such as formulated in the Green Deal, the EU loses credibility; 4.) An inter-capital flight does not contribute to connect Europe as it does not reveal the Europe's variety in landscape and culture. The petitioner makes reference to the EP resolution ([2019/2195\(INI\)](#)) of 15/09/2020 where Parliament stipulated that student should be encouraged to use the most environmentally friendly mean of transport and additional costs should be reimbursed. In this spirit, the petitioner criticizes the Commission's guidelines of 25/03/2021 to ERASMUS+ programme as insufficient as the subsidy is too low to compensate for higher costs by train and too bureaucratic to obtain. The petitioner and his organisation therefore call for combining ERASMUS+ and the Interrail programme and grant free Interrail tickets for all students. These could be distributed via national or international ESN offices.

## 2. Admissibility

Declared admissible on 19 July 2021. Information requested from Commission under Rule 227(6).

## 3. Commission reply, received on 21 September 2021

### 'The Commission's observations

The Commission would like to thank the promoters of the initiative 'Erasmus by train' for the constructive approach and for the rich discussions maintained at the meeting on 26 January 2021.

The 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme has set environmental sustainability and fight against climate change as one of the horizontal priorities of the programme. The new Erasmus+<sup>1</sup> puts different mechanisms and initiatives at the disposal of organisations and participants to directly contribute to the green transition and the priorities of the European Green Deal.

Erasmus+ aims to reduce the greenhouse emissions associated to physical travelling for learning mobilities, to maximise awareness raising and to foster competences that are important for environment and sustainable economy. In this sense, Erasmus+ is supporting the use of innovative and awareness-raising practices to make learners, volunteers, staff and youth workers true factors of change (e.g. save resources, reduce energy use and waste, compensate carbon footprint emissions, opt for sustainable food and mobility choices, etc.).

In terms of mobility, the new Erasmus+ programme is gradually striving for carbon-neutrality by promoting and facilitating the use of low-carbon means transport modes (in particular, travel by train).

The new means include financial incentives as an extra economic help for the travel costs for those participants using low-carbon means of transport (e.g. train), together with the possibility of having more days for travelling. The relevant programme IT tools have been adapted to monitor the carbon footprint associated with the travels.

The Commission cannot oblige the use of train above any other means of transport. The 27 Member States and 6 other countries fully associated to the programme are very different in terms of their geographical situation (islands, outermost regions, remote areas) and infrastructural conditions (bad connections, slow train network). The Erasmus+ programme does however strongly encourage the use of low-carbon means of transport and facilitates this by granting extra travel days and financial support for the use of such low-carbon transport.

It should also be noted that an increased contribution for travellers using low-carbon means of transport is implemented for all Erasmus+ participants in learning mobilities (school pupils, VET students, staff, etc.) and is not limited to the field of higher education.

The Erasmus+ grant is a contribution in the form of unit cost for administrative simplification, but is not designed to fully cover the actual full cost according to articles 188(c) and 190 of the

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<sup>1</sup> Information on the opportunities provided by the programme: [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/opportunities\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/opportunities_en)

EU's Financial Regulation.<sup>2</sup> The contribution may be further increased in the future if data proves that it is not sufficient according to the real costs of travels performed by participants.

In line with these measures, the Commission is in contact with Eurail, which to our understanding is considering specific discounts on Interrail passes to Erasmus+ students.

It should also be noted that, since June 2018, the Commission has implemented a three-year Preparatory Action of the European Parliament called DiscoverEU and has awarded around 70 000 travel passes through four application rounds for which around 350 000 young people have applied. As of 2021, DiscoverEU is integrated in the Erasmus+ programme.

DiscoverEU offers young Europeans aged 18 free travel passes across the continent. Travelling mainly by train, which is one of the most eco-friendly means of transport, the participants are inspired to be conscious and feel accountable for their choices while travelling, including the ones related to the environment and nature of the places they visit. Young people are encouraged to use this experience to embrace sustainable practices in their future travelling. 90 % of the young travellers who answered to the post-travel survey declared that, following their experience with DiscoverEU, they were more inclined to travel by rail within the European Union.

To further reinforce the message, the DiscoverEU theme for 2020 was a 'Sustainable Green Europe' (it is also Youth Goal number 10 of the European Youth Strategy), supporting natural heritage sites, encouraging participants to be active and aware of environmental issues. Activities were organised in this context such as regular 'Green' contests on Social Media, promotion of green itineraries that include European Green Capitals and Green Leaf Cities and promotion of accommodations holding the EU Ecolabel. Those activities will continue in the future.

This year's annual theme under DiscoverEU is linked to the '2021 European Year of Rail' in order to support the objectives of the European Year, such as promoting rail as a sustainable, innovative, energy-efficient and safe mode of transport, and changing the attitudes of 18-year-olds about rail travelling. Awareness-raising activities, learning experiences and events in 2021 will be directed towards this theme, including social media messages, monthly competition themes, the use of e-influencers to stress the benefits of rail travel and a 2021 DiscoverEU rail route highlighting architecturally outstanding and historically interesting train stations.

Although DiscoverEU is a rail-based initiative, its rules foresee that, in exceptional cases, travel by plane is permitted. This ensures that young people living on islands, in the outermost regions and remote areas also have a chance to take part in the initiative. Furthermore, it is also possible for the young DiscoverEU travellers from all across the EU to explore also those islands. This remains a constraint to implement travel by train for all participants.

## Conclusion

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<sup>2</sup> Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 July 2018 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union, amending Regulations (EU) No 1296/2013, (EU) No 1301/2013, (EU) No 1303/2013, (EU) No 1304/2013, (EU) No 1309/2013, (EU) No 1316/2013, (EU) No 223/2014, (EU) No 283/2014, and Decision No 541/2014/EU and repealing Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 966/2012, OJ L 193, 30.7.2018, p. 1–222.

The Commission is not planning to combine Erasmus+ and the Interrail programme by granting free Interrail tickets for all students as proposed by the petitioner. However, a range of other measures are included in the framework of the programme to foster the use of more sustainable transport modes, including travel by train, as a preferred means of travel.

The new Erasmus+ programme encourages and facilitates more sustainable travel by granting additional travel days and financial support to all Erasmus+ participants who are making use of such low-carbon transport, including higher education students.

The DiscoverEU activities that support travelling mainly by rail are fully integrated in the new programme as well. The post-travel survey indicates that 90 % of young people having benefited from the DiscoverEU initiative opt for train travel more often. The Commission is indicatively planning to distribute over 60 000 travel passes under this action in 2022.

The Commission will closely monitor and evaluate the shift towards more sustainable travel during the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme and will adjust and reinforce existing measures or put in place new measures, if necessary.'