

Another amazing EU-project for young people

by Egon C. Heinrich

What means "Discover EU"? It does neither mean an EU-project fostering archeology nor information technology or even artificial intelligence. At first it is simply a more fashionable title for "EU Interrail." It has therefore to do with young people travelling across Europe by train.

The project was initiated by a group of youngsters and very quickly supported by the European Parliament. The initiative was launched in June 2018, following a proposal from the EP for a Preparatory Action with a budget of 12 million Euro for 2018. For this year the EP has approved an amount of 16 million Euro. On the basis of the total budget of 28 million Euro some 50 000 young people at the age of 18 were selected to receive from the EU-Commission a Discover EU travel pass with an amount of 260,-- Euro. With such a travel pass the youngsters can travel alone or in a group of up to five other candidates selected for a duration between 1 and 30 days. They must visit at least one, at the most two other Member States of the EU. Of course the amount of 260,-- Euro is not very high, but travellers with such an Interrail Pass can make rather long journeys. Travelers from or to islands and remote regions of the EU can use flights, ferry boats or buses; they need of course the pre-consent of the Commission or the Commission's contractor. By the way Discover EU never pays for accommodation, food or travel insurance.

20 000 travellers selected in third round

Nevertheless there is an enormous interest for this scheme by the young people. So almost 95 000 youngsters have applied for the third round which was closed at the beginning of June this year. As a result 20 000 young people of 18 have now been selected to receive the travel pass. They can make their trip between 1st of August 2019 and 31st of January 2020. In the selection procedure priority is given to candidates having a so-called "disadvantaged background". Two thirds of participants of the first round said that they would not have been able to finance their travel without the help of Discover EU. For many of them it was the first time they could make a journey without parents or guardians.

In any case Discover EU helps the young travellers to learn more about European cultural heritage and diversity, to connect with young people from other countries and cities and to explore their European identity. Feedback from nearly 5 500 participants shows that they regard Discover EU as a valuable and inclusive learning experience which contributes to civic engagement, personal growth and skills. Travelling gives young people also the opportunity to develop self-confidence, to learn foreign languages and inter-cultural skills.

EU-Commissioner Navracsics: Making friends across borders

When releasing the results of the third round in June this year Commissioner Tibor Navracsics said: "This month Discover EU is celebrating its first anniversary. In one year around 275 000 young Europeans applied to become part of the experience, with some 50 000 awarded a travel pass. I am proud to see that more and more young people are exploring the richness of our history and culture, making new friends across borders, becoming more independent and self-reliant and ultimately discovering themselves."

As well as the travel pass participants will receive technical support and guidance on topics such as sustainable travel and what it means being a Discover EU Ambassador. They will be also invited to report back on their experiences, for example through social media tools like Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, or by providing a presentation at their school or their local community. They will also be able to get in touch with their fellow travellers on social media in order to share their stories.

Commision suggests 700 Million Euro for 1.5 Million young travellers

The Commission is planning to launch the next application round before the end of 2019, when another about 20 000 travel passes will be available. In May 2017 the Commission proposed an amount of 700 million Euro for Discover EU as part of the future Erasmus programme in the framework of the long term financial planning 2021 to 2027. Such an amount would enable the Commission to give travel passes to around 1,5 million young people. Those potential 18 years old travellers will certainly watch very closely what the new Commission, the new European Parliament and the Council of Ministers will decide in their interest.

Regarding the various programmes in favour of the young generation retired people – a lot them is also relatively poor – may ask the question: “And what does the EU offer to us”? They would certainly be grateful receiving a check of 260 Euro to co-finance a short holiday at one of the marvellous beaches in the European Union. We all know that there does not exist a budget line in the EU-budget to finance daily life or even holidays of EU-citizens. Older people who have not yet retired may benefit from EU-programmes co-financed by the Social or Regional Fund. And some Member States offer reductions for over 60 or 65 old people for public transport, tickets for theaters, museums, libraries etc.

So finally retired people may find comfort in being convinced that the young generation will pursue the European unification project which was launched almost 70 years ago and has proved to be a great success despite all crisis and difficulties the EU had to overcome.