*Pandemic and Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine. Two Unprecedented Challenges for the European Education Area**

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Abstract

The year 2025 will be an important year for the process of realising the European Education Area. Next year, in fact, the European Commission will have the opportunity to prepare a comprehensive report on the progress made during the first cycle (2021-2025) of this "ambitious" project. This report will enable the Council to review the strategic framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training, including the targets, the governance structure and the working methods previously set, thus making any necessary adjustments for the second cycle (2026-2030). This essay intends to offer a contribution to the evaluation process of the first cycle.

Keywords: *European Commission; Inclusion; Digital Innovation; Humanities Education.*

1. Towards the first cycle evaluation process (2021-2025)

The year 2025 will be an important year for the process of realising the European Education Area. Next year, in fact, the European Commission will have the opportunity to prepare a comprehensive report on the progress made during the first cycle (2021-2025) of this "ambitious" project (see European Commission, 2020). This report – which will follow an earlier "progress report" published in November 2022 (see European Commission, 2022) – will be based on the lessons learned from the experience of the first years of work and on the outcomes of the latest "consultations",

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currently under way[1], with the Member States, with the other institutions of the European Union and with stakeholders in general[2], will enable the Council to review the strategic framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training, including the targets, the governance structure and the working methods previously set, thus making any necessary adjustments for the second cycle (2026-2030) (see Council Resolution, 2021a; European Commission, 2022).

The European educational space – trying to give a summary definition of it – is the idea of a virtuous, dynamic and transnational space for inclusive and quality education, in which young Europeans, besides developing the training and skills needed to face today's many challenges, can mature, share and strengthen their belonging to the European Union. While it is true that such an area has been slowly and spontaneously taking shape over the centuries, thanks to the free circulation of ideas and cultural exchange between educational institutions and universities in different parts of Europe, it is equally true that the idea of a common educational area, in a more specific and organised sense, was born – we can say – implicitly with the very idea of the European Union, to then become a concrete project in very recent years: we find a first hint of it in the 2017 Rome Declaration.

A young project, therefore, but also structurally open and constantly evolving. The main documents that mark its course, in fact, constantly recall the importance of monitoring processes and possible periodic reviews of the project, which should follow, in particular, the emergence of new challenges and thus new political requirements of the European Union. Challenges that have certainly not been lacking in recent years, and indeed – we may say – have literally accompanied the birth and initial definition of the project: reference, of course, goes in particular to the Covid 19 pandemic and the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine.

If, in fact, as already mentioned, the first hints of a common vision of education in Europe date back to 2017 – and, in particular, we find them between the lines of the Rome Declaration, a document dated 25 March 2017, and in the Commission's contribution to the Gothenburg European Leaders' Summit in November of that same year (see, respectively, The Rome Declaration, 2017; European Commission, 2017) – it is only two years later, more precisely between 2019 and 2020, that the European education area begins to take on a more solid and defined configuration (see, among other documents, Council Resolution, 2019; European Commission, 2020), and is further strengthened by the two European Union Coun-

1 The planned timeframe for these "consultations" opened in the second quarter of 2023 and will end in the second quarter of 2025 (see European Commission, 2023).

2 The intention of the *Commission's Call*, especially addressed to the contribution of the "main stakeholders of the education and training sector", was specifically "to collect information and opinions […] in order to arrive at a measured and evidence-based judgement on the progress made in the realisation of the European educational area" and thus, to widen and enrich the data base for the "comprehensive report" of 2025 (European Commission, 2023).

cil Resolutions of February and November 2021 (see, respectively, Council Resolution, 2021a; 2021b).

These dates clearly highlight, therefore, the intertwining, and almost chasing one another, between the documents just mentioned and the two painful events mentioned above, which, considering – as we said – the constitutively open and flexible nature of the pathway towards the realisation of the European space of education, cannot – and in part, in the case of the covid 19 pandemic, already have – fail to have an impact on the evaluation process of the first cycle and thus in redirecting the pathway of the project for the following five years.

2. More inclusion and digital innovation: the effects of the pandemic on the European education area

In the case of the Covid 19 pandemic, which – as is well known – has been sweeping through Europe since February 2020, the first reflections with regard to the development of the European education area can be found in the Commission's Communication on Making a European Education Area a reality by 2025, dated 30 September 2020 (see European Commission, 2020). This is the same important document in which the six dimensions of the European education area are outlined – which will then evolve, roughly, into the five strategic priorities set out in the Resolution of the following February (see Council Resolution, 2021a) – *namely quality, inclusion and gender equality, green and digital transition, teachers and trainers, higher education, and the geopolitical dimension.*

The repercussions of the pandemic event in the education and training sector are inescapable and obvious: more than 100 million people – roughly as many as make up the education and training community – are suddenly exposed to entirely new and challenging ways of teaching, learning and communicating in general; at the same time, however, the opportunities for revitalisation inherent in the economic countermeasures promptly deployed by the Union are clear: in July 2020, the European Council approved an unprecedented recovery package, within which investments in education, training and the effective use of skills are clearly seen as strategic for supporting the economic and social recovery of Europe as a whole.

It is immediately obvious, therefore, when the pandemic breaks out, the need to avoid in any way that the health crisis invades the education systems, thus becoming an obstacle to training, learning and therefore to the employment prospects of young people and, among other things, risking a very negative impact on equal opportunities and school and social inclusion. And yet it must be acknowledged, in this respect, that far from being an obstacle, the pandemic has rather turned out to be an extraordinary opportunity for revitalisation, by not in any way modifying, in substance, the innovative and inclusive orientations on education and training expressed

in the previous Commission and European Council documents, but on the contrary accelerating and strengthening them, and moreover accentuating the importance of a European educational area as an ideal horizon to support a more intense cooperation between the Member States necessary to tackle and overcome the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic.

In short, we can say, as can be deduced from the Communication of September 2020 and the Resolution of February 2021, as well as from other documents complementary to our discourse, that the pandemic event, despite the commendable capacity for rapid adaptation shown by the European education and training systems, if on the one hand it exposes some fundamental weaknesses and criticalities, particularly in terms of inclusion, equity and digital innovation, highlighting worrying social and geographical divides[3], on the other hand, for this very reason, it represents an extraordinary confirmation of the positivity and farsightedness expressed by the vision and strategic priorities of the project for the realisation of the European educational area, constituting in this sense – as we said – a precious opportunity for its relaunch in terms of greater commitment, more available resources, new actions needed, but also more careful monitoring of them and of the quality of investments.

This last aspect is particularly emphasised in the above-mentioned "progress report" of November 2022 (see, in particular, European Commission, 2022: par. 4.1 and 4.3), in which the disruptive impact of the pandemic outbreak on learners and teachers is once again stressed, but also – in line with the above – the extent to which this event has mobilised the European education space, channelling a higher level of attention towards education and training policies. Supporting reforms and investments in this area, further strengthened under the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework, is in particular the recovery and resilience facility (rrf), which has allocated 14% of its total budget of 71 billion euro to the education and training sector, allocating them mainly to reducing inequalities, resilience and the green and digital transformation of education systems (around EUR 28 billion earmarked for e-skills development) (Ibid.: par. 3.1) and, again, specifically to universities, in order to make them promoters and custodians of change in line with the objectives of the European education area.

On this last point, the "progress report" states:

> The pandemic has stimulated more innovation […]. In addition to the digital infrastructure, Member States also plan to invest in the development of digital content and advanced digital skills, the adaptation of curricula, the training of academic staff, the development of online courses/education and the digitisation of governance. […] through modernising curricula, launching new courses of study, introducing microcredentials, promoting stem/

3 "The pandemic of Covid 19 has further highlighted the importance of inclusion and equity in education and has demonstrated the relevance of the geographical location of students and families" (European Commission, 2020: par. 2.2).

steam specialisations, improving governance and funding, enhancing access to higher education for disadvantaged students and supporting inclusivity, e.g. through targeted scholarships, recognition of qualifications or access to affordable student accommodation (*Ibidem*).

The pandemic, therefore, has clearly accelerated the education and training orientations already present in previous EU documents, demanding inclusion, modernisation and digital innovation from universities in particular.

3. Strengthening humanities education: the lesson of Russia's aggression against Ukraine

The "progress report" also dwells on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, pointing out that this event, like the Covid 19 pandemic, has "profoundly affected and mobilised the European educational space" (European Commission, 2022: par. 3). However, these two events, although equally tragic, are profoundly different and therefore deserve to be tackled in different ways and with different solutions, not least because, in November 2022, when the report in question was drafted and made public, the two events are going through very different phases: the first, the pandemic, has seen its most dramatic effects come to an end and now appears controllable; the second, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, is a very recent event with completely unpredictable consequences.

The latter circumstance probably explains the only 'emergency' approach with which the European Education Area mobilises its instruments to support the hard-hit Ukrainian education sector.

Indeed, the report immediately highlights how the European Commission promptly mobilised EU funds to support the inclusion of people fleeing Ukraine in the education system[4]. Following the Russian military intervention, as is well known, millions of Ukrainian citizens, mostly women and children, flooded into EU countries, posing no small challenge for them. The most immediate priority, therefore, was to "ensure the inclusion of children [in many cases traumatised by the war and with little knowledge of other European languages] in the ordinary quality and inclusive education system for the school year 2022-2023, maintaining their connection with Ukraine" (Ibid.: par. 3.2). Fundamental to this was the work done by the High-Level Group on Education and Training, further strengthened a few months earlier by the establishment of a specific Coordination Committee

4 Specifically, the Commission established the *EU Education Solidarity Group for Ukraine*. This group – as the "progress report" notes – "helps to identify needs related to ensuring that Ukrainian children continue to attend school and supports host countries by bringing together expertise available across Europe. The group is rooted in existing instruments and mechanisms within the strategic framework of the European Education Area, including working groups" (European Commission, 2022: par. 3.2).

(see Council Resolution, 2021b). This group has been decisive in coordinating the response to the emergency, and thus in making it faster and more effective, in particular by intercepting and collecting the common needs and concerns of the member states and enabling them to benefit from fruitful mutual exchanges and valuable knowledge and information on crucial issues, such as, for example: recruitment of Ukrainian personnel, access to early childhood education and care, recognition of qualifications, psychosocial support, organisation of entry exams for higher education, language learning and more. Also worth mentioning, within the framework of the Erasmus+ programme, are the new opportunities offered to participants from Ukraine, opportunities which the "report", albeit briefly, takes into account.

On the one hand, all organisations that have activated or are activating Erasmus+ projects are facilitated in hosting Ukrainian teachers and students for teaching assignments or for periods of study or training. On the other hand, the availability of staff with specific competences, e.g., psychosocial or linguistic, to travel to the regions where refugees are hosted in greater numbers is encouraged. In particular, higher education institutions, both in member states and in non-EU countries associated with the programme, "may host and finance students and staff from Ukrainian higher education institutions without the formal involvement of the home institution", allowing beneficiaries to benefit from further forms of support, from "assistance with accommodation, [to] integration into the local academic community, [to] language preparation" (European Commission, 2022: par. 3.2). It is clear, of course, how much the aims of reception, social inclusion, participation and civic engagement that these new opportunities imply are in full harmony with those that generally inspire the Erasmus+ programme.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning, again in the context of the initiatives taken in support of the Ukrainian education sector, the Commission's commitment to contribute, as soon as possible, to the full recovery of education in Ukraine, both through the reconstruction of damaged structures and schools and, above all, through progressive involvement in the European education area. In fact, after Ukraine was granted the status of candidate country on 23 June 2022, the Commission – reads the "progress report" – "invited the authorities in charge of education to join the working groups of the strategic framework of the European Education Area, which will contribute to better mutual learning and continuous support to cope with the negative impact of Ukraine's invasion on education" (Ibid.: par. 4.5).

All this, however – as already mentioned – does not exhaust, nor could it exhaust in such a short time, the many facets that the response to an event of such magnitude evidently also requires in terms of education. Not only because the concrete and immediate support summarised here needs to be confirmed over time and intensified – considering that, at the time of writing, Russian aggression against Ukraine is still tragically on going and does not seem to show any signs of abating[5] –, but also and above all because

5 This article was written in May 2024 and sent for publication the following December.

the event we are talking about, which began on 24 February 2022, bringing war back to European territory and openly taking the form of a direct challenge to freedom, democracy and the rule of law, in fact represents an attack on the heart of the European Union, insofar as it affects its founding values, and as such cannot fail to call into question first and foremost the issue of education.The European Union, in this respect, has always shown full awareness of the strong link between education and the founding values of its community, and the documents that mark the path towards the realisation of the European education area amply attest to this awareness. Suffice it to mention the Commission Communication Strengthening European identity through education and culture of November 2017, in which it is clearly stated how crucial education and culture – as well as sport – are in spreading common European values among the younger generations: every community is founded on the sharing of values, and in particular a relatively young and developing community such as the European Union, which therefore – aware of this – takes on the commitment to promote as its founding values freedom, dignity, democracy, equality and respect for the rule of law and human rights in general, in order to strengthen the sense of cohesion and European identity (see European Commission, 2017: esp. par. 4).

Deepening this awareness, however, today in particular, means first of all clearly recognising a danger, extremely insidious because it is intangible, a danger that we have been indolently living with for some time: that of continuing to nourish ourselves with an essentially ahistorical view of the aforementioned European values, that is, one that does not take into account the fact that they are not eternal and absolute values, but historical and human, and therefore not acquired nor can they ever be acquired definitively, and that on the contrary they need to be, particularly among the youngest, constantly recalled, reaffirmed, experienced: in a word, taught. "If this does not happen, the risk is that of their gradual obfuscation, of a slow but inexorable decline; or that of an austere and rigid crystallisation, functional only to legitimise an instrumental and melancholically empty use" (Cafagna, 2024: 29). A sad epilogue, the latter, but also a very propitious terrain for the risk of anti-democratic contagion, which is indeed always possible but today more than ever lurking at the gates.

Hence the urgent need today not only to continue to keep the theme of education at the centre, and indeed to intensify the commitment towards the realisation of the European educational space, but also, within the framework of this "ambitious" project, to do so by investing with renewed awareness and in an innovative manner in the teaching of those humanistic disciplines directly deputed to transmitting both historically and emotionally, the founding European values to the new generations, and which for too long now – not only in Europe – have been experiencing a phase of financial downgrading and increasingly accelerated marginalisation in the public discourse but also in the educational institutions themselves (see Ibid.: 49 ff.).

Among the five strategic priorities identified in the important Resolution of February 2021 – which, it should be remembered, in accordance with them tries to outline the future profile of the teaching workforce –, the first one in particular, "improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training", relates more explicitly to one of the two main objectives of European cooperation in education and training, the one that interests us most here: namely the specific objective of supporting and strengthening education and training systems "aimed at ensuring the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens, while promoting democratic values, equality, social cohesion, active citizenship and intercultural dialogue" (Council Resolution, 2021a). And it is perhaps in the sphere of this first strategic priority, then, and in particular among the various and agreeable "issues and concrete actions" outlined in its support, that we need to intervene, concentrating on further actions that can more incisively favour a relaunch of the humanities through a more decisive innovation in teaching methods, training courses, the design of new curricula and new specialisations and, last but not least, in the governance of funding (on these aspects see Cafagna, 2024; and, forthcoming, Gemma & Cafagna, 2025).

A relaunch that must be configured with clearer awareness as a horizon that is anything but secondary for a European Union that is struggling today – and not by chance – to become a strong and cohesive community around its founding values.

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