



BUILDING EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

HANDBOOK

By Europahuis Ryckvelde



**Building
European
Democracy**

An Erasmus+ project from DEO, CROSOL & Europahuis Ryckvelde



**EUROPAHUIS
RYCKVELDE**

THUIS IN EUROPA

CONTENT

Democracy is something we do together 3

Democracy in the EU: an ongoing construction	3
Democracy in the EU under pressure?	4
Populism	4
Radical Right	5
Building European Democracy' as reinforcing factor for the EU debate	5

Belgium in the European Union 6

Founding member state and compromise	6
Our complex state structure and its challenges (and advantages)	7
Distribution of powers	7
Advantages	7
The Belgians' perception on the European Union and democracy	8
EU elections in Belgium: a celebration of democracy or an ancillary event?	8
The overshadowed European elections	9

Adult education in Belgium 10

Different options to define 'adult education'	10
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Europahuis Ryckvelde 11

Get to know our organisation	11
Pillar education	11
The education system in Belgium - a brief history	11
The First school war	12
The Second school war	12
Structure and organisation of the education system in Belgium	12
Structure	13
Organisation	13
The EU in the current Flemish 'lesson plans'	14
Relevant key competences	15
Our work	15
Workshops for all audiences, according to our educational principles	15
Challenges and obstacles	16
Innovative methods	17
Pillar Socio-cultural adult work (SCW)	19
What is SCW	19
Our work	19
Activities, events and debates	19
Challenges and obstacles	19
Innovative methods	20
Others	20
Our organization as partner	20
Our organization als E+ partner	20
Internationalisation	21

Our experience during the partnerships exchange weeks 21

Used methods	22
Inspiring results insights for future activities	23



DEMOCRACY IS SOMETHING WE DO TOGETHER

DEMOCRACY IN THE EU - AN ONGOING CONSTRUCTION

The European Union values democracy highly and aims to be one itself. In practice, this means that:

- Every five years, there are European elections in which EU citizens directly elect a new European Parliament (**representative democracy**).
- 'Democracy' is enshrined as a value in the European treaties and is a crucial **accession criterion**.

Generally, 'democracy' within the EU is defined as a '**liberal democracy**': one that protects individual rights and freedoms. Each individual determines their own political, economic, cultural, and spiritual development. Diversity is acknowledged, allowing different beliefs to coexist. Differences of **opinion and conflict are explicitly present**.

As our Danish partners indicate in their handbook, we can consider democracy as a shared practice, a way of life. And although the liberal democracy promises individual rights, freedom and safety, these do not come out of the blue. It's a permanent **construction site**, where contingencies occur and where the EU citizens are **involved as workers to build the democratic society**.

And while there are various views, interpretations, or opinions on how 'democracy' should be achieved, the word itself refers to one of its most important features. The word **democracy** is derived from the Greek words '**demos**' (= the people) and '**kratein**' (= to rule/power). Literally translated: '**power of the people**'. In other words, a democracy derives its main strength from a **high degree of participation**. The workers on the construction site need to work, otherwise the construction will not progress.



Democracy' within the EU is defined as a 'liberal democracy': one that protects individual rights and freedoms.



DEMOCRACY IN THE EU UNDER PRESSURE?

In June 2024, Europeans elected a new composition of the European Parliament. According to the initial provisional projections, the **European People's Party** remains the **largest**. Additionally, a **weakening of the left** (especially the green faction) is evident, along with **growth** for the factions on the **right side** of the spectrum.

Notably, among the top five national delegations are already two **populist radical-right parties**: Rassemblement National (FR) and Fratelli D'Italia (IT). Radical right-wing parties also hold a significant number of seats in Austria (FPÖ), Hungary (Fidesz), the Netherlands (PVV), Poland (PiS), Germany (AfD), and the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Vlaams Belang). Many of these parties now fall under the 'NI' category. It remains to be seen what the new definitive faction distribution will look like, but the **shift to the right cannot be ignored**.

European Parliament 2024 - 2029

Provisional results

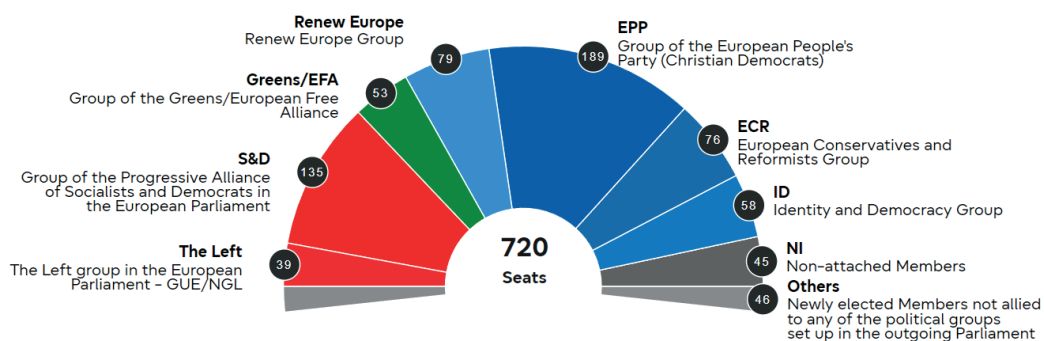


Image: Provisional results after the EU elections. © Verian for the European Parliament

Does this endanger our democracy? A closer look at the term 'populist radical right' offers us more insight.



Populism

In definition, the term '**populism**' often refers to a style, namely being 'of the people,' and appealing to what the people want. Populist leaders are **nationalistic** because their emphasis is on 'their own people,' whom they often see as a homogeneous group with the same identity. Preservation of national or traditional values is more important than safeguarding universal values, and this is where the problem lies. In a liberal democracy, the aim is to uphold **individual rights and freedoms**. This means that 'the people' do not consist of one homogeneous mass.



The European Parliament consists out of 720 seats divided by The left, S&D, Greens/EFA, Renew Europe, EPP, ECR, ID, NI and others.

Radical Right

Just as there is no single definition for the term 'democracy,' there is also no clear-cut definition for 'radical right.' However, this reference to the right side of the political spectrum is often linked to nationalism and authoritarian tendencies. Law and order in a strictly organized society are characteristic of this.

Let's extend our comparison: in a world where populist radical-right parties are in power, the construction site is not necessarily destroyed (since no party actually wants to leave the EU), but rather divided and fenced off (RN, for example, advocates for protectionist measures around agriculture). Moreover, not everyone who previously had access to the site is still allowed in (if, according to the populist leader, you do not belong to 'the people' due to, for example, a migration background, a different religion, or sexual orientation).

'BUILDING EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY' AS A REINFORCING FACTOR FOR THE EU DEBATE

Europahuis Ryckevelde, together with its Danish and Croatian partners, is convinced that the **European debate needs to be strengthened**. We want to make sure that **ALL EU citizens feel empowered on the construction site** where the democratic society is built. And for this, **education, information and public debate are essential**. This Erasmus+ project allows to become a reinforcing factor for the EU debate by searching for good practices and innovative methods.

This handbook specifically **focuses on how Europahuis Ryckevelde fulfills its role** in this endeavor. We start with a brief but essential introduction about the country in which our organisation operates: Belgium. After that we situate our organization both within the Belgian educational landscape and in social-cultural adult work (as a movement). In the last chapter we already reflect on the methods used during the exchange week in Belgium and the inspiring results on future activities. With this handbook, the ambition is to provide a Belgian contribution to a transnational reflection.

BELGIUM IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

FOUNDING MEMBER STATE AND COMPROMISER

From the very beginning of European cooperation, Belgium has played a role. While it's not necessary to know the entire history of the country, some knowledge about its geographic location is important. Along with the Netherlands and Luxembourg, Belgium is situated between France and Germany. Consequently, throughout history, Belgium often acted as a buffer state between the great powers.

It's not surprising that after Robert Schuman's press conference on May 9 1950, Belgium also sent a delegation to the negotiating table. Originally, the Belgians weren't quite sure what to expect, but one thing was clear: if both France and Germany were designing a plan to collaborate, Belgium could not afford to stand on the sidelines. As a result, Belgium was involved in the initial official negotiations that later led to the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community.



Image: Belgium between France and Germany. © European Union



Not only in the early years but **also throughout the further integration of Europe**, many Belgian politicians contributed to the Union's development. The then Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene served as the vice-chair of the convention that led to the creation of a European constitution¹. Additionally, the very first European President, **Herman Van Rompuy**, was Belgian. Just like the **current European President: Charles Michel**.



The construction of the European Parliament in Brussels started in 1989.

The Belgian politician Jean Rey became the first Commission President from 1967-1970 after the merger of the institutions. From 2014 - 2019, Marianne Thyssen, as commissioner for employment and social affairs, she succeeded in giving European policy a more social dimension.

In addition to Belgium's presence in the very first European cooperation and the fact that many Belgians hold top European positions, the country has another significant European dimension: Brussels as European capital.

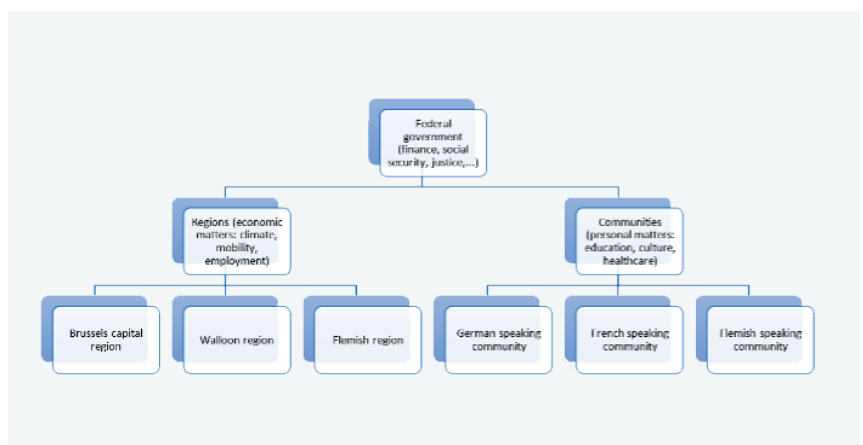


OUR COMPLEX STATE STRUCTURE AND ITS CHALLENGES (AND ADVANTAGES!)

Belgium has approximately 11 million inhabitants and, in terms of land area, is smaller than Denmark or Croatia. It's a relatively small EU member state, where one might not expect much complexity in its political system at first glance. However, the opposite is true. In summary, Belgium is officially referred to as a **"federal state, composed of communities and regions"**. A deeper dive into the Belgian state structure reveals that there are a total of six sub-states: three regions and three communities. Adding these to the federal level, you have a total of 7 parliaments and governments. However, the Flemish community and the Flemish region are represented by a single Flemish parliament and government, bringing the total to **six parliaments and governments in one country**.

Distribution of powers

In Belgium, **decision-making authority is divided among three different policy levels**: the federal state, the communities, and the regions. The federal state is responsible for matters concerning the entire Belgian territory. The communities are responsible for personal matters, and the regions are responsible for territorial matters. Legally, these three policy levels are considered equal.



It gets even more complicated when you know that the **regional governments** are often **composed differently** in terms of political ideology. For a long time, for example, the largest party in the Flemish government was liberal-conservative, while the largest party in the Walloon government was socialist. This changed after the elections of 2024, when the liberal party became the biggest party in the South. The federal government is not necessarily composed of the same political parties as the Flemish and Walloon government.

Advantages

Belgian politicians are accustomed to negotiating with each other and **seeking compromises**. The term 'a Belgian compromise' is even used for compromises on a subject where opinions vary greatly, but it still contains a solution that everyone can agree with. This is a characteristic that is very useful in European politics. Belgians are often the driving force behind the scenes during important negotiations.



THE BELGIANS' PERCEPTION ON DEMOCRACY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Generally, **most Belgians feel that they are EU citizens (86%)** and are aware of the EU citizenship right² that come with it (often above the EU average)³. In the most recent 'standard' Eurobaromete⁴ 22% of Belgians indicated that they identify solely as Belgian. The rest **(78%) identify (also) as European**.

Notably, however, although Belgians generally (partially) identify as European and are aware of their citizenship rights, **less than half (47%) have a positive view** of European cooperation. 33% remain neutral on this, while 20% have a negative view. Moreover, according to calculations by 'Statistics Flanders'⁵, there was a clear decline in trust in European institutions in 2023.

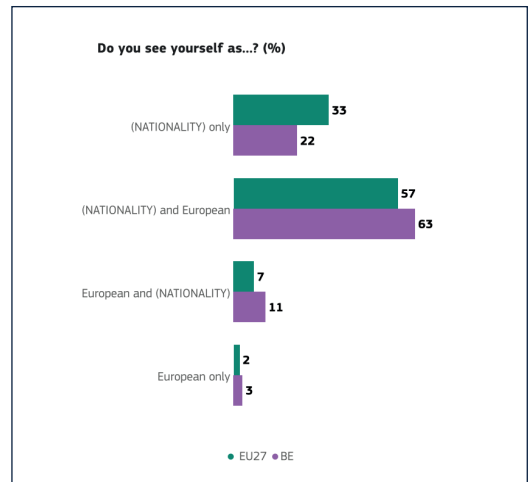


Image: The EU in the world
(Source: Standard Eurobarometer 101 - spring 2024)

EU elections in Belgium: a celebration of democracy or an ancillary event?

When looking at **Belgium's voter turnout** for the EU elections in 2024 **(90%) compared to the EU average (51%)**, one might assume that Belgians eagerly anticipate the European elections and turn out in large numbers. However, this perception changes upon realizing that Belgium has compulsory voting. In Belgium, due to this **compulsory voting**, it is difficult to accurately gauge how Belgians feel about this 'day of democracy.' However, the most recent **Eurobarometer on democracy (2023)**⁶ does highlight several concerns. Only 6% of the population in Belgium indicated they are "very satisfied" with how democracy functions in their country. 41% are "somewhat satisfied," and a significant **50% are not or not at all satisfied** (the remaining 3% selected "I don't know"). When asked about the greatest threats to democracy, Belgians ranked "incorrect/misleading information" first, "lack of engagement and interest in politics" second, and "propaganda from foreign sources" third. In response to what the most important elements are that define free and fair elections, 52% placed "access to accurate information to make an informed vote" as the top priority.

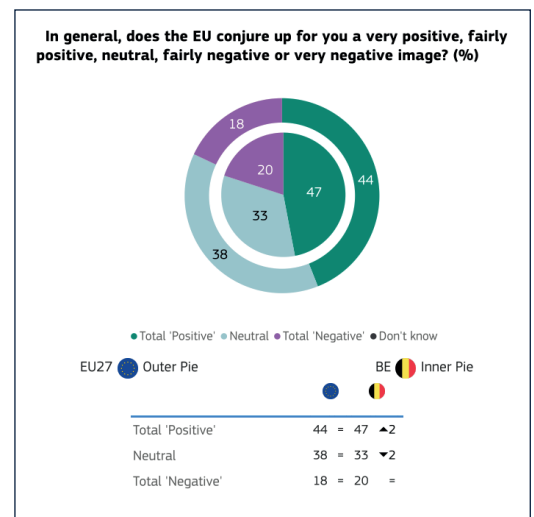


Image: Life in the European union
(Source: Standard Eurobarometer 101 - spring 2024)



From these various Eurobarometers, as well as from the firsthand experience of our educational staff (who are on the road almost daily to provide training), it becomes clear that there is a significant need for accurate and correct information to engage in more informed debates about EU topics or to cast a vote. However, it is not easy to bring the European level into the spotlight. The best example in Belgium to illustrate this issue is the overlap of the European elections with the Flemish and federal elections.

The Overshadowed European Elections

Since the sixth state reform of 2011, the European **elections in Belgium coincide with the regional and federal elections**. This measure was implemented to prevent parties from having to conduct almost continuous election campaigns. Additionally, election campaigns are expensive and exhausting for parties.

However, recent election campaigns show us that **parties mainly target voters through their regional and federal standpoints**. The European level (and consequently the relevance of this policy level) is completely overshadowed.

Even in 2024, during the election campaign, you mostly saw **Flemish and federal leaders in national or regional radio or television programs**. Although inevitably 'European themes' such as climate and migration were discussed, the discussions always reverted to the national/regional levels. Most of the time, it didn't go further than 'we need to find a European solution for this.'

Moreover, the educational staff of Europahuis Ryckvelde experienced firsthand that the **general public was often unaware** of what the EU does or who the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are. During the many workshops and lectures⁷ on the European elections, hardly anyone could name the Belgian MEPs. Even the more practical aspects, such as the principle that you can vote for three different parties in the three elections, were not common knowledge

²EU citizenship rights' include, for example, the right to file a complaint with the European institutions, the right to reside in any EU member state, and the right to a citizens' initiative.

³Figures and findings taken from the Eurobarometer 'Citizenship and democracy (2023)': <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2971>

⁴Standard Eurobarometer 101 - Spring 2024: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3216>

⁵<https://www.vlaanderen.be/statistiek-vlaanderen/relatie-overheid-en-burger/vertrouwen-in-europese-instellingen>

⁶Eurobarometer Democracy (2023): <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2966>

⁷Thanks to our efforts, we reached nearly 3,000 young people (first-time voters) and adults between January and June 9, 2024.

ADULT EDUCATION IN BELGIUM

DIFFERENT OPTIONS TO DEFINE 'ADULT EDUCATION'

Adult education in Belgium is a **diverse and dynamic field**, offering numerous pathways for adults to continue their education, enhance their skills, and achieve personal and professional goals. Here are some possibilities:

Within the educational landscape (on your own initiative or possibly even through your employer): Adult education is separate from the initial educational career. Students can earn a recognized diploma, certificate, or qualification. Adults aged 18 and over, as well as young people who have completed full-time compulsory education, are eligible to enroll.

Mandatory by law: the right to training (only in organisations with at least 20 employees): The "workable and flexible work" law, stipulates that every full-time employee has an individual right to training. This law applies to both formal and informal training (directly related to work). The training can also pertain to matters concerning their welfare. As an employer you also need to have a formal training plan. Every employee is entitled to at least five training days per year.

As a member of an organization or association: In Belgium, there are many organizations and associations where members can regularly enrich themselves through lectures, outings, or exchanges. For example, there is *OKRA* (an open organization for and by seniors), *Actueel Denken en Leven* (for those who choose well-founded information and wish to follow recent developments in society), or *Markant* (exclusively for women).

The following explains how our organization operates and how adult education is also integrated into our framework.



EUROPAHUIS RYCKEVELDE

GET TO KNOW OUR ORGANISATION

The mission of Europahuis Ryckvelde is to raise awareness about the impact of the European Union. Therefore, we focus on **informing, debating, and participating** to ensure that people take an active role in European democracy.

Our goal is not to turn our participants into enthusiasts for Europe, but rather into **well-informed and critical citizens** who are familiar with Europe. Europahuis Ryckvelde is a small but vibrant organisation. Our small team works with passion, creativity, and dedication. We rarely shy away from questions that fit within our mission and vision. The tasks our staff undertake are very diverse. Therefore, we organize interactive information sessions, workshops, debates, and participation evenings. **Broadly speaking, we operate on two pillars: one for education and one for adults**, preferably in their leisure time. These two pillars reinforce each other.



Europahuis Ryckvelde is a small but vibrant organisation. Our small team works with passion, creativity, and dedication.

PILLAR EDUCATION

The education system in Belgium - a brief history

To map out education in Belgium today, we need to go back to the period just before the creation of Belgium itself. In 1815, during the Congress of Vienna, the Belgian and Dutch provinces were united into one state, with the **Dutch King Willem I** at the head. However, the **Belgian liberal bourgeoisie increasingly turned against the king's interference**, with state involvement in school policy being a major point of contention. The focus on free education prompted the Catholics to form a **'Monster Alliance'** with the liberal bourgeoisie. This strong opposition formulated a common set of demands in 1828, which eventually led to the Belgian Revolution of 1830.



This revolution enabled the Belgian provinces to separate from the Dutch. Less than six months later, **in February 1831, the first unitary constitution was approved**. As early as this very first, unitary constitution, the principle of legality for educational matters was established. This principle determines that the organization, recognition, or subsidization of any type of education must be regulated by law. The **freedom of education** (old Article 17) was also enshrined at that time, alongside freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and freedom of association.

It quickly became clear that the **financial dependence** on the state to organize education increasingly conflicted with the desire to organize education without state interference. This tension led to **two school wars**. Moreover, the participants in the 'Monster Alliance' had completely different visions. The Catholics wanted to maintain their grip and influence on society through education, while the liberal bourgeoisie wanted the opposite, seeing education as a means for individual and societal development.

Image: The Belgian revolution 1830

The First School War

In independent Belgium, education was **initially predominantly left to the Catholic initiative (free education)**. The first school war therefore focused on the establishment of **'neutral state schools (official education)'**.

Depending on whether the government was more liberal or Catholic, **different laws were enacted**. The liberals aimed to stop subsidizing 'free schools' to ensure the expansion of 'official education'⁸. The Catholics responded by prohibiting Catholic teachers from teaching in official schools and pressuring the religious community: Catholic parents were no longer allowed to send their children to official schools⁹.

The Second School War

It was only after World War II that a second school war emerged in Belgium, when a funding problem arose. The **free education system** (which by then received less subsidy than the official system) had to charge increasingly **higher tuition fees**. It was not until 1958, when the liberals, Catholics (Christian Democrats), and socialists established a national school commission, that the school wars ended with the 'School Pact Law.' **The School Pact Law**, signed in November 1958, outlines four basic principles:

- The recognition of official and free schools
- The freedom of choice for parents
- The right to funding for free education
- The freedom of choice for students in official education between religious courses and non-denominational ethics courses.

Today, **the freedom of education** is included in **Article 24 of the constitution**. Essentially, this means, on the one hand, that the 'education provider' has the right to establish educational institutions without state interference ('free education'). On the other hand, it also pertains to 'education users,' who have the freedom to choose a school project according to their own philosophical, ideological, or religious beliefs.



Structure and organisation of the educational landscape in Belgium

Since 1988, through the third state reform, education has become a **community competence** (Article 127 of the Belgian Constitution). There are only a few 'residual federal education competencies' that apply to the entire territory, such as **compulsory education from six to eighteen years old**. With the state reform, the constitutional legislator aimed to prevent official education from being disadvantaged compared to free education. In other words, the principles of the School Pact were anchored. As a result of decentralization, the education system is quite complex. In short, **each community (the Flemish, French, and German-speaking) has its own educational authorities and regulations**. Even the school holidays in the different communities fall at different times. To avoid confusion in this handbook, and because Europahuis Ryckvelde operates within Flanders, we will **only delve into the structure and organisation of the education system at the Flemish level**.



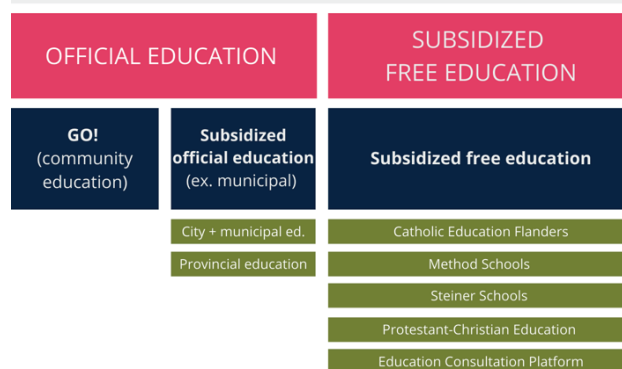
Structure

Until today, there exists in Flanders **official education** (organized by the government) and subsidized **free education** (usually organized by a non-profit organization). Within these two main categories, there are various 'networks' (in blue) and 'umbrella organizations' (in green).

A **'net'** is a grouping based on the **organizing authority**. Official education, for example, consists of two networks: the Flemish community is the organizing authority for GO! (community education), and local governments (cities, municipalities, and provinces) for subsidized official education. Subsidized private education consists of only one network.

An **'umbrella organisation'** represents and supports school boards and is responsible for developing curricula and lesson plans. The curricula outline what students should know and be able to do by the end of the school year. To ensure that each 'koepel' does not present entirely different curricula, the government sets end terms and development goals that must be included in a recognizable manner. Additionally, each 'umbrella organization' can emphasize its own specific focus areas.

STRUCTURE OF THE EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE



Organisation

In the Flemish education system, there are traditionally **three levels of education**: primary education (6-12 years), secondary education (12-18 years), and higher education (18+). Additionally, there is 'lifelong learning,' which is aimed at adults.

Lifelong learning or adult education is separate from the initial educational career but can be accommodated within the same structure depicted above. Depending on who organizes adult education, it falls under either official or subsidized free education. For example, CVO (adult education) fall under the GO! network, while KISP (also adult education) is under the umbrella of Catholic Education Flanders. In general adult education students can earn a recognized diploma, certificate, or qualification. Adults aged 18 and over, as well as young people who have completed full-time compulsory education, are eligible to enroll. Adult education is **organized in a modular format**. The center is free to spread a module over a portion of the year or over a full year. Modules can therefore start at different times of the year, and the student can assemble their study package and determine the duration of their studies themselves.



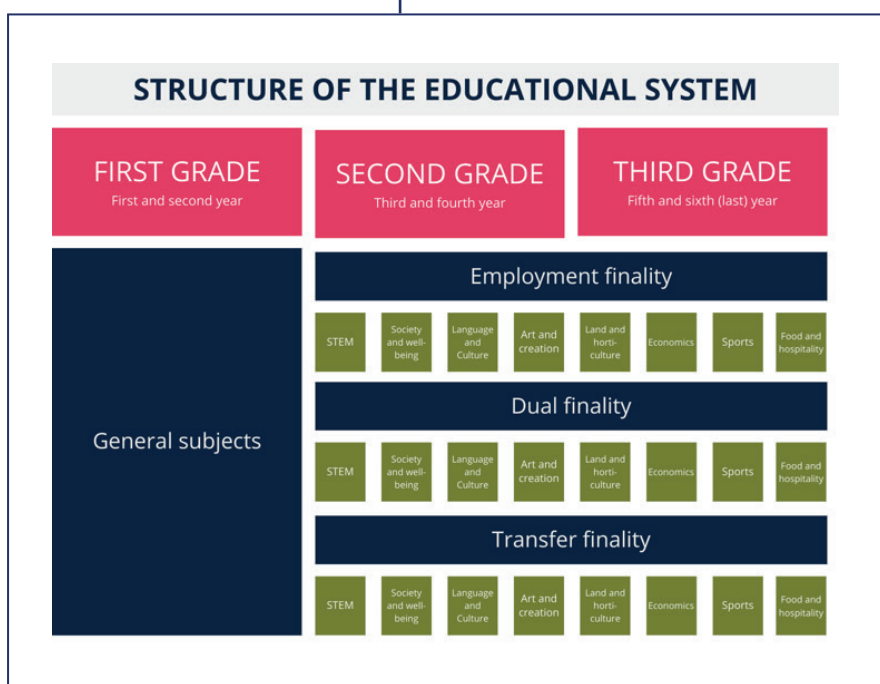
In all three grades, for all finalities and domains of study, there are the same 16 key competencies. These are clusters containing various interlinked competencies that students need to acquire to function in society and to develop personally.

The EU in the current Flemish 'lesson plans'

Since 2021, the Flemish Government has been undertaking a **comprehensive educational** reform that will be implemented over several years. The goal is to complete the last reforms **by the end of 2026**. Because in our organization, within the education pillar, our **main target group is students in the third grade of secondary education**, it is interesting to examine how the EU is addressed in the official educational goals. Before we do that, let's briefly outline the structure of secondary education.

Secondary education in Flanders is structured into **three grades, each consisting of two years**. In the first grade, students prepare for their choice of studies from the second grade through a more general education. In the second and third grade, they choose a finality (in blue) and a study domain (in green). Graduating from the employment finality allows students to directly **enter the job market**. With the dual finality, students also have the option to **further their studies** alongside potential employment. The transfer finality is aimed at preparing students for higher education (university or college) thereafter.

Study domains are more like areas of interest (such as STEM, arts and creation, language and culture) within which you can follow various specific courses of study.



In all three grades, for all finalities and domains of study, there are the **same 16 key competencies**. These are clusters containing various interlinked competencies that students need to acquire to function in society and to develop personally. Examples include: "Citizenship," "historical awareness," "sustainability," or "financial-economic competencies."

In the first grade, student receive the basics, in the second grade there is an expansion, and the **third grade is the deepening**.

Relevant key competences

There are a total of eight key competencies that Europahuis Ryckvelde can address. Content-wise, these competencies include “Citizenship, historical awareness, legal competencies, sustainability, and spatial awareness.” Additionally, through our methodologies, we also work on the attitudes featured in the key competencies of self-awareness and physical and mental health (respectfully expressing emotions). The competency ‘Citizenship’ (in the third grade) includes two explicit mentions of the EU:

- Students explain the influence of local, national, and European citizenship on different societal domains.
- Students explain the influence of European citizenship using current events (with a significant focus on the functioning of the internal market, which can also be addressed in economics lessons).

Everything related to politics and democracy is also covered under this competency. The ‘legal competency’ includes a mention of the European Court of Human Rights, but for the content in all the other competencies, you have to find a European connection yourself.



Image: primary school students after an interactive EU workshop.

Our work

Workshops and readings for all audiences, according to our educational principles

The mission of Europahuis Ryckvelde is to promote active European citizenship. In other words, we are committed to every EU citizen, from young to old. This mission translates into our educational work through offerings for diverse target groups. We provide educational materials and tailored sessions for primary school students, secondary school students in the upper grades, higher education students, and adults in adult education.

We empower informed and critical citizens and carefully consider the themes we address and always ask ourselves what our target audience needs to know or be able to do to contribute to a healthy and improved European democracy.



Image: Secondary school students during an interactive EU workshop.



Image: Higher education students during a simulation exercise/debate.



Image: Adults (CVO - adult education) during the workshop 'refugees in Europe'.

When creating each new workshop or educational tool, we take into account the educational principles of our organization. These are:

- **Tailored:** Groups are very diverse, so we tailor the content, difficulty level, theme, methodology, duration, etc., as much as possible to the target audience.
- **Ready-to-use:** The materials are immediately usable, without requiring extensive preparation by the facilitator, and are user-friendly.
- **Based on the experiences and learning needs of the target audience:** For the development of didactic materials, we work with a working group from the intended target audience.
- **High-quality:** The provided information is accurate, respects copyrights, and is clearly and concisely formulated.
- **Neutral:** The information is presented in a neutral manner. Based on this, individuals can form their own opinions.
- **Creative and engaging:** The provided information is not only comprehensible but also presented in a way that makes people excited to learn more. We use various methodologies, online tools, and integrate game elements.
- **Interactive:** We allow space for critical questions and reflections, as well as for as much personal input and action as possible.
- **We make Europe tangible:** Use of cartoons, photos, videos, and concrete examples.
- **Contemporary:** We utilize contemporary media to shape our materials.

Challenges and Obstacles

Since the early days of Europahuis Ryckvelde (1956), our founders have been inviting schools to 'Ryckvelde Castle' to discuss the then early European cooperation. Over the years, our organization has maintained its reputation and kept a **large following among schools**, making it relatively easy for us to reach them. However, from our experience, the **real challenge lies in convincing students of the significant impact of the EU**. Similarly to our Danish partners, we observe that in Belgium, the relevance of the European Union and its connection to current European themes is barely addressed in educational goals. While there are some key competencies to which we can link European themes, our organization typically provides the European perspective ourselves. By strictly adhering to current educational goals, **the European perspective can easily be overlooked**, focusing solely on the EU as a policy level. This general approach to the EU as a policy level often means that young people are not familiar with the EU's impact on their daily lives.

Moreover, for teachers, keeping up with the rapidly changing European news is challenging. Teaching a lesson on the European Green Deal, its implications, and challenges requires extensive research and preparation. Many teachers find this daunting and therefore stick to the mandatory, limited curriculum. As a result, the EU is reduced to a single lesson topic with perhaps just one exam question. This approach overlooks the broader context, the link to students' own lives, the fact that the EU is feasible and influenced by debates and human decisions—essentially the most relevant and intriguing elements.

Innovative methods

Although our organization is not focused on creating innovative digital gadgets or developing apps (often associated with 'innovative methodologies'), at Europahuis Ryckvelde we are convinced that **we contribute to innovation**. We **transform complex EU themes into creative, interactive workshops** and often emphasize **experiential learning**. We ensure that students become enthusiastic about EU topics by using engaging methodologies, tools, and games. Additionally, it is important for us that participants understand that the European Union is feasible: every decision is subject to debate.

In this handbook, we describe how our most popular workshop on the theme of migration operates. We have been conducting this training since 2018 and continue to see its success. Some schools book our session year after year for their students.

Workshop 'refugees in Europe'

The workshop on refugees in Europe lasts a total of 2 hours and 30 minutes and consists of **two main parts**. Each part represents a completely different perspective on the theme. The main goal is to create an accurate understanding among young people regarding the topic.

In the first part, students play a board game where they assume the identity of a person fleeing. **The objective of the game is to be recognized as a (war) refugee** in the European Union. If they succeed, they receive a residence permit.

Up to five students can sit around the board game. They receive information about their new identity through a passport. This includes their life story, the reason for their flight, their intended destination, the route they will take, and so on. To obtain a residence permit, they must first reach their final destination. They do this by **progressing through different levels**. The first level represents the home situation. The second level is the escape route, taking them on a harrowing journey towards the European mainland. In the third level, they arrive in Europe and finally, in the fourth level, they get the chance to apply for a residence permit.



The objective of the game is to be recognized as a (war) refugee in the European Union.

Image: one of the assignments during the boardgame is to register in the Eurodac-system.

In each level, students must **solve questions and complete tasks successfully**. Additionally, 'fate' plays a role in this board game, with both positive and negative consequences. Participants might get caught by the police, get involved with human traffickers, or get stuck at a border. When they reach the final level, **the ultimate task is to apply for asylum**. After about an hour of playing, we pause the game for a thorough **debriefing**. Using the students' own stories, we connect back to reality. We discuss their current situation (whether they are now recognized, living in illegality, still on the way, or in the asylum procedure) and provide statistics to illustrate the scale of this actual topic today.

In the second part of the workshop (the map exercise), we examine the refugee situation from a completely different perspective. Participants are **assigned a new role**: that of the **head of state or government leader of an EU member state**. Along with this role, each participant receives a box containing information about their country: GDP, population numbers, the number of asylum applications, the number of Ukrainian refugees with a temporary protection status, and so on.

Once the roles are assigned, **we gather around a giant map of the European Union**. Through **questioning and discussion**, participants **experience** firsthand how difficult it is to reach a common European asylum and migration policy. Visually, they can see on the map how the capacity of countries differs (there are large countries with low GDP, small countries with very high GDP, large countries with lots of money but also many inhabitants...). Additionally, they learn through an extra card in their box what national measures their country has taken (such as strengthened border controls or sending refugees to other member states) and their country's stance on issues like a relocation plan.

We conclude the map exercise with **an update on the current EU policy** and the newly approved migration pact. Finally, participants have the opportunity to **share their own views** on the topic and to think about how the EU can shape a common asylum and migration policy in the future.



This session was very refreshing and a fun way to learn; I remembered a lot from it. Presenting the content in this way made me feel very engaged with the topic. In short:
Fantastic!

(Quote taken from our evaluation forms that we send out after our sessions).

PILLAR SOCIO-CULTURAL ADULT WORK (SCW)

What is SCW

The socio-cultural adult work sector is unique to Flanders and supports many social and cultural activities for people in their free time. These activities focus on meeting people, informal learning, community building, and social engagement. This sector is part of the socio-cultural work policy field and covers a wide range and often overlaps with other areas of society, from local to international levels. It often deeply influences different aspects of life (work, environment, housing, welfare...). People participate voluntarily, independent of school or professional training.

Our work

Activities, events and debates

Aligned with our mission and the objectives of the social cultural work sector, we organize **numerous activities for adults in their free time**. Our goal is for Flemings to have sufficient knowledge to participate in European democracy, which doesn't happen overnight.

Firstly, in collaboration with various partners, **we offer lectures on the functioning of the European Union and various European topics** such as migration, climate, and AI. We also host lectures where we explain current events from a European perspective. Afterward, participants have time to ask questions and often engage in discussions about the topic or current European events. They leave with a new knowledge and tell us that this helps them better understand Europe, its functioning, the topics, and thus also better contextualize what they see in the media.

In addition to lectures, we **organize numerous debates linked to current events**. Here too, we rely on partnerships and often seek unique locations. For example, during the election year, we organized several debates with the European lead candidates. To involve our audience, **we use interactive tools** (online polls) to make their opinions heard in the debate. Another example is the debate on European enlargement we organized 20 years after the largest enlargement ever (10 countries in 2004) at the museum: 'House of European History'. During these debates, we provide a platform for politicians and academics, and actively involve our audience.

We also strive to **broaden our audience reach**, not just targeting those interested in the European Union. Therefore, we focus on

larger, more attractive, and accessible events. An example of this is our 'State of the EU,' where we invite a Famous Fleming to discuss a European topic from their perspective. We organize pop-up campaigns to hit the streets and inform people, such as the "12 differences" campaign, which is also available online:

Scan the QR-code to discover the '12 differences' campaign



Challenges and obstacles

Unlike our operations within the education pillar, where we have built a large reach over the years, we have not yet succeeded in establishing a (large) steady audience within our SCW pillar. Essentially, **the biggest challenge is our target audience: adults in their free time**. Since the corona crisis, we have noticed within our organization (and also with other organizations that book us as speakers) that it is harder than before to physically bring people together for a lecture. Evening lectures are often canceled or, if they do go ahead, attendance numbers are disappointing. **Not only is reaching people not easy, but convincing citizens that the EU is an interesting topic** to work on is also a challenge. ➤



From experience, we know that the 'European Union' is perceived as 'far from my bed', 'too complex', or 'boring'. Furthermore, adults are not always aware of the significant impact the EU has on their own lives. Or to put it in a Dutch saying: 'onbekend is onbemind (translation: unknown is unloved or what one does not know, one does not love).

Finally, **the political situation in Belgium**, and more specifically the rise of right-wing parties, creates uncertainty in the sector. The fear of reduced subsidies (the lifeline necessary for some organizations) puts pressure on the sector. Additionally, in recent years, a rather distrustful atmosphere has developed between the sector and the government. For example, the Minister of Culture initiated an additional screening after some organizations communicated about the situation in the Middle East. The growing political interference was not well received by the sector.

Innovative methods

Thanks to this 'building European democracy' Erasmus+ partnership, our organization **gains insights** into new methodologies that we can use to empower European citizens and strengthen the European debate. Besides the experiments we conduct through our joint debates (which themes appeal, which methodologies are most effective, and at what times we reach the most citizens), we also want to **explore how to physically bring adults together** in their free time. Many insights and ideas emerged during our **exchange week in Belgium**. These are described under the final title in this handbook, "Our Experience During the Exchange Week in Belgium."



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OTHER ACTIVITIES

Our organization as partner

Since it is difficult to create a large following on our own, Europahuis Ryckvelde places great emphasis on **valuable partnerships**. These partnerships allow us to bring our expertise and sessions to EU citizens. For specific projects, we sometimes collaborate with major players such as the European Parliament or the European Commission, but the Europe Direct centers (linked to the provincial level in Belgium) are also very valuable partners. Additionally, temporary partnerships with other civil society organizations or cultural institutions (e.g., to co-organize a debate) only strengthen our operations further.

Our organization als E+ partner

Our organization is currently involved in **two different E+ projects**.

The first, "Building European Democracy" (of which this handbook is a part), focuses on **adults**. The aim is to strengthen the European debate through good practices and innovative methods.

Our second E+ project (PEACE) is aimed at **students** in the third grade of secondary education (15-17 years old). The goal is to increase students' knowledge about the EU and provide teachers with tools to incorporate the EU into their curriculum. Between 2024 and 2026, we will work with our Danish, Irish, and Bulgarian partners to develop various educational packages about the European Union on three themes (climate, defense, and EU values).



"Our project has been approved! This means we can organize several mobilities over the next two school years, fantastic right? Thank you for your support and tips, you were a great help to us"

(Quote from an email to our organization from a school submitting an E+ application)

These should give students more confidence in their democratic skills, strengthen their citizenship skills, and increase their knowledge of European matters. Teachers should be able to work independently with the material, which is available for free download from, among others, our own website.

Internationalisation

Europahuis serves as the stepping stone for many schools and non-profit organizations towards their international ventures. We guide schools and organizations through the landscape of funding opportunities and build bridges to the National Agency, actively referring to one another.

As an **EPALE ambassador**, we also promote the EPALE message. Schools and organizations can participate in **four different training sessions** on internationalization, suitable for both absolute beginners and experienced institutions: 'Funding Opportunities', 'How to Start an International Project?', 'Toolbox Session 1: Towards a Genuine Internationalization Policy', and 'Toolbox Session 2: Towards an Efficient Internationalization Practice'. These sessions often lay the groundwork for a new internationalization story or help anchor it within the school's policy. We offer these sessions online, and to extend our reach, we also collaborate with educational networks. In addition to training sessions, we provide **manuals** on starting an international project or submitting a dossier for Erasmus+.

Furthermore, our **helpdesk** function is also a very important feature, offering schools support throughout their entire internationalization journey: from finding the right funding opportunity and writing a dossier to embedding internationalization in their policy.

OUR EXPERIENCE DURING THE PARTNERSHIPS EXCHANGE WEEK IN BELGIUM

The exchange week in Belgium took place in April 2024 and **focused on European institutions and European elections**. A total of 36 adults from the three different partner countries (Belgium, Croatia, and Denmark) participated. **The group was very diverse**, both in terms of age (ranging from 19 to 80 years) and geographical distribution (urban/rural). At first glance, they seemed very different (we had students, retirees, nurses, teachers, activists, people from NGOs, etc.), but they all had one thing in common: they were very motivated to learn about the functioning of the European Union. Naturally, the exchange in Belgium included a **day trip to Brussels**. Our participants had the opportunity to visit the European Parliament and engage in discussions with top diplomats from the Representation of Flanders to the European Union. The other days were used for workshops, lectures, brainstorming sessions, and debates.





Used methods

In collaboration with CROSOL and DEO, we are already experimenting with debate formats during our online debates. Additionally, during the exchange week, a fun 'speed dating game' was organized. Furthermore, we implemented a co-creation methodology by hosting a world café.

Speeddating game

The idea behind the speed dating game was very simple but proved to be extremely popular with our participants. Various tables were set up outside, each with a question to discuss. Participants could freely choose which table to join for a discussion on the question. After 5 minutes, they were required to switch tables. Originally, we had planned for this activity to last only 45 minutes, but due to the participants enthusiasm, we extended the duration.

World Cafe

The World Café brainstorming technique is a **co-creation methodology** that ensures more concrete and workable ideas are derived from very broad, loose ideas. A World Café session consists of **multiple rounds and encompasses various themes** (spread across different tables or rooms).

After each round, participants switch tables and thus also change themes. Additionally, they find themselves in a newly composed group after each round. In other words, this methodology is designed so that, as a participant, you contribute to each theme and engage in discussions with different participants each time.

During this activity, we collected ideas from citizens regarding citizen engagement. More specific about three themes: the rule of law, the green transition and the EU in general.

First round: Brainstorm (at least 30min)

The first round is the brainstorming session. The goal here is to get as many ideas on the table as possible. It's important to communicate that **all ideas are welcome** and good. There are no bad ideas. In this phase, don't go into too much detail and think in general ideas, activities, or actions. The central question in our world cafe was: If you could do anything that you want in your spare time regarding the theme '....', what would it be?



*Second round: Selection and building on the idea
(at least 30min)*

In the second round each participant receives two small stickers. After reviewing the ideas, each participant can place their sticker(s) on the ideas they consider the best. This quickly visually identifies which ideas emerge as the best. After that there's an exchange of ideas in which the group discusses what is on the table and argues why certain activities are chosen. Ideas can be combined here, or elements that are highlighted as good can be added to the most popular ideas.



Third round: Development and presentation of the ideas

In this round, one idea is selected and further developed as concretely as possible. The participants must also explain why it's also inspiring/relevant for the EU. The result: a sheet with the title, the type of activity, and a brief description.

Presentation and voting Round

From each table, one person explains the idea to all participants. Afterwards, participants are given 5 minutes to freely move around between the final ideas and cast their votes on the best ones.

Inspiring results

The outcome of the World Café provided us with a lot of inspiration. We mapped out the various ideas in this handbook across different categories and chose for each category one idea that stood out to us and that we definitely want to consider for the future. This does not mean, of course, that the other ideas are inferior or less feasible. It is certainly worthwhile to review all of them with equal attention.

Digital tools/apps



Learning by experience



Digital tools/apps

Further developments in the digital world will have to show whether it is actually possible, but we are already dreaming of lectures or debates in the virtual world.

Learning by experience

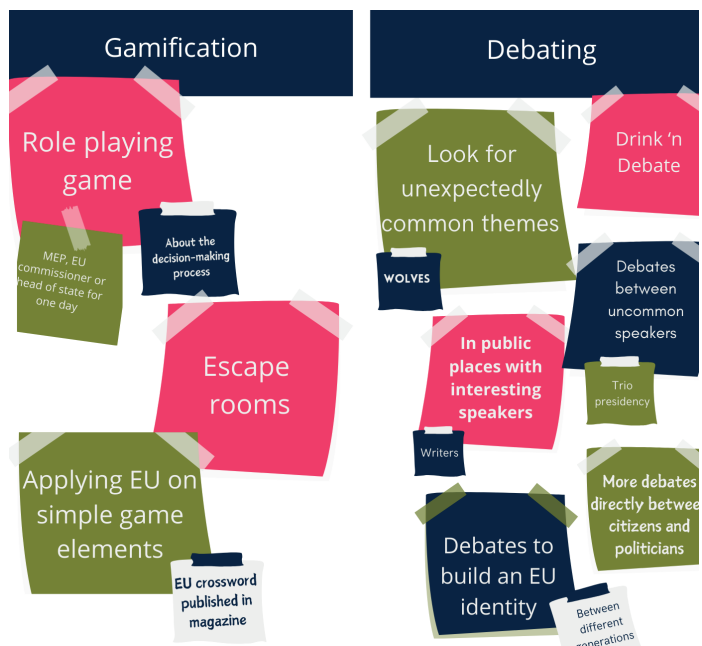
It becomes very clear that a visit to the European institutions would mean so much more if it could **take place when all the key players are present and actively working**. In practice, this sounds difficult to achieve, but we believe that a format in which EU citizens have the chance to participate in a competition to spend a day at for example the Commission (in progress!) once a year would be absolutely unique.

Gamification

A simple, self-made crossword puzzle in a local newspaper. It can be that easy to provide people with at least some basic information about the European Union. Moreover, our participants themselves indicated that they found this a very enjoyable way to learn. What this category especially teaches us is that, as an organization, we don't always need to look too far for solutions.

Debating

Unexpected common themes and uncommon speakers. Both create a certain trigger for adults, making them more likely to be drawn to debates. This insight is very interesting and something to work with in the future.



Ideas linked to specific themes

Migration - Human library

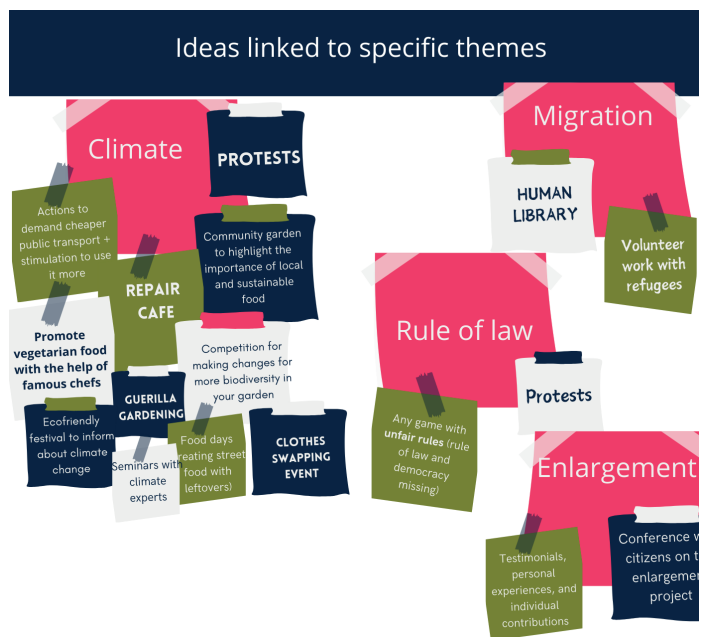
This event takes place in a public space where inhabitants of a certain town can meet migrants and refugees. They will be "live books" and talk about their previous life, their integration in society and reasons for coming to Europe.

Other participants can "borrow" a book and ask anything about their life. This is a perfect way to learn more about other cultures and to gain a better understanding of the topic 'migration'. It strengthens inclusion and cohesion. The idea behind it is also to reduce xenophobia and fear among locals towards foreign citizens. Our participants even came up with a slogan: If you don't know someone, you can't love them.

Other creative/fun ideas

EU penpals, an EU festival (like EYE but for adults), run a marathon while getting informed on EU themes, an orientation run in the EU buildings... Our participants showed their most inspiring sides. Each idea was unique, some more unconventional than others, but all equally

special. In this category, we couldn't decide which one stood out the most. We invite you to, while closing this handbook, dream along with these exciting ideas as well.





OUR PARTNERSHIP

Building European Democracy is an Erasmus+-project where the Danish organisation Democracy in Europe Organisation, the Croatian organisation Crosol and the Belgium organisation Europahuis Ryckvelde together will work together to strengthen the European debate from 2022-2024.

Together we will strengthen the debate and cooperation across Croatia, Belgium and Denmark. We will focus on two topics that are highly important in the European cooperation. The first topic we will focus on is the green transition in the EU where we will take a closer look at how areas such as energy, transportation and agriculture can contribute to the green transition in the EU. The second topic is rule of law where we will take a closer look at the challenges that the European Union experiences in some European member states at the moment and how we can strengthen the rule of law in the future.

During the next two years we will publish two e-books and invite you to online debates and workshops that focus on the two topics.



All activities and material will be available on our webpage:
<https://be-democracy.eu>





**Building
European
Democracy**

An Erasmus+ project from DEO, CROSOL & Europahuis Ryckvelde



**EUROPAHUIS
RYCKVELDE**

THUIS IN EUROPA