

ESPI Executive Brief

Space against Youth Unemployment

It should be a commonplace by now that something targeted has to be done regarding youth unemployment in the European ‘periphery’. Sustained youth unemployment of 30 to 60 percent in Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland will ultimately lead to a lost generation and a brain drain, unless something probate is done soon. A lost generation is, of course, morally indefensible and would introduce unbearable social tension for many years to come. The European house that has been built since WWII is perhaps more solid than we give it credit for, yet ‘he who sows wind shall reap the whirlwind’ and it is certainly inadvisable to invite the whirlwind to test the strength of our moorings.

Clearly space is not a panacea for what is ultimately a huge European problem. But macro-economic crisis must, to some extent, be met by micro-economic counter-measures, and hence it would appear incumbent on all European economic sectors to analyse what they individually can do to help, even if it may not be much! Space has the potential to be an uplifting contributor towards amelioration, because space already has strong pan-European institutions and industry and because space activity can target very precisely a given demographic. The sector is not huge – but it is iconic. The signal effect of space coming to the aid of youth in the periphery should not be under-estimated.

Space is appealing to youth because it is hi-tech and pioneer. Furthermore, increased youth involvement in space builds skill sets that can be easily deployed also in other future-orientated segments of the economy. And, importantly, space inspires and can bring new students to the critical disciplines of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). Hence, space activity has a significant propagation effect on the national level and this is important for drawing the youth into active involvement in the economy on a sustainable basis.

Greece, Spain Portugal and Ireland have well-educated youths, deployable in space activity with only modest training investment, and particularly Spain has significant untapped space expertise among its young. Hence a good foundation for creating targeted space activities for the youth of the ‘periphery’ exists.

How could such projects look? The answer to that is that the youth in the affected countries should be asked. Crowd-sourcing, and associated prizes for best ideas, is a powerful tool to engage a broad segment of a population, even if it will not be on a full-time basis. Project objectives and the architectural definition of missions could very well be crowd-sourced from the youth under expert guidance from European institutions which would safeguard both project integrity and that the project would fit well in the overall space portfolio. Space science and Earth observation missions could be imagined as particularly likely to capture the imagination the young.

After mission definition, suitable facilities would then have to be identified in the countries, preferably from existing institutional and industrial resources. Thereafter, core teams of engineers and support staff at system and subsystem level would have to be built based on periphery-wide competition between professionals of less than 35 years of age. With the key teams and facilities in place the projects would subsequently be undertaken in classical project mode, possibly involving ‘mentors’ drawn from retired senior people from space industry, who would be willing to invest part of their time to give a new generation a chance and serve as role-models and dispensers of seasoned advice.

Of course, not every Euro invested in a youth-orientated space project would ultimately go to the youth; most investment would still go to the general space industry. But since the projects would serve scientific and general application goals just like all other space projects the only real discriminator would be that a youth project would give youth and industry from the ‘periphery’ an extra chance. A youth project would not be a ‘bridge to nowhere’ employment scheme, but a genuine space project with societal utility – and the added benefit of giving employment and hope to the youth that has been put in such a perilous situation.

Alliances would have to be built between funding authorities, such as the European Commission, the space agencies and space industry in order to be able to provide a workable environment. So, all necessary actors would have to go the extra mile to make such projects a success. Yet, they should have every incentive to do so, as they would serve the future interests of space, and, more importantly, societal goals that will define whether we can build a cohesive European society in the face of centrifugal forces which are not only divisive but leading to greater and greater regional inequality.

Many arguments can be fielded against initiatives like the ones suggested here, but none would seem to trump the moral and societal imperative of doing something effective for a generation which has no guilt in the current troubles of their societies, but stand the risk of being the one to pay the heaviest price!



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