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## **THE ROLE OF SHORT-TERM YOUTH EXCHANGES IN REDUCING GLOBAL CULTURAL POLARIZATION**

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Cultural polarization is a process in which the culture, traditions and social values of different groups become a source of misunderstandings, stereotypes and even conflicts. Such polarization contributes to the development of barriers between cultures, which complicates mutual understanding and cooperation in a globalized world. Modern global challenges require finding new ways to reduce these barriers, and one of these ways is short-term youth exchanges. Short-term youth exchanges have significant potential in overcoming cultural polarization. They contribute to the formation of openness, respect and mutual understanding among young people of different cultures, as they allow participants to directly experience the experience of other peoples, work together on joint projects and develop emotional and cultural intelligence. Due to this, short-term exchanges can become an effective tool for the formation of a more integrated and cohesive society. In this context, it is important to investigate to what extent such exchanges can help reduce the level of social tension, isolation of certain groups, increased xenophobia and extremism, which in turn can lead to political and economic crises. The analysis of the results of such programs will help to assess their real impact on participants and their perception of cultural differences. The methodology of this study involves the analysis of scientific articles, reports and studies that highlight the experience of youth

exchanges in different countries. By comparing the results of several short-term programs, their impact on intercultural understanding and the reduction of social barriers between cultures will be assessed. Special attention is paid to the analysis of practices and results that indicate how short-term programs can help overcome the existing cultural polarization at the global level. Programmes such as Erasmus+ connect students from different parts of the world, creating a space for dialogue and cooperation. Erasmus+ Youth exchanges last between 5 and 21 days. This excludes travelling time. Youth exchanges are open to people aged 13 to 30. The current selection process for students for short-term mobility under Erasmus+ (i.e. intensive programmes and blended intensive programmes) is based solely on the order of students' enrolment and their grades, but alternative methods of selecting participants are now being actively proposed and this issue remains controversial [1]. Educational exchange programs are one of the most effective tools of globalization that promote the integration of cultures. Based on the study by Valerie Douglas [2], which analyzes the experience of medical students in the Erasmus+ program, it can be concluded that this program contributes to the reduction of cultural polarization through the development of intercultural competence. Despite language barriers, students acquire skills to adapt to new socio-cultural conditions, interact with representatives of other nationalities and professional communities, which contributes to the formation of critical thinking and overcoming stereotypes [2, p. 140]. The study shows that mentors and international coordinators play a key role in the adaptation process, helping students overcome communication difficulties and integrate into the professional environment of the host country [2, p. 122-129]. Participants, being in a new cultural environment, experience stress, which can cause three types of reactions: adaptation, assimilation or rejection [3, p. 44]. However, the results of the study indicate that the majority of participants go through this challenge with a positive effect, as evidenced by the increase in their ability to empathize, self-awareness and effective management of emotions [3, p. 45]. They also recorded an improvement in their psychological immune system (PISI), which makes them more resilient to stressful situations and more open to other cultures [3, p. 48]. In addition, participants noted the importance of establishing international professional and friendly ties, which contributes to the establishment of cultural dialogue and the reduction of prejudices [3, p. 52]. Thus, Erasmus+ plays a significant role in overcoming cultural polarization, contributing to greater openness, mutual understanding and integration of different cultures. The RAY LTE study also confirms the significant impact of the Erasmus+ program on the formation of civic

competences. Participants who have undergone training and international exchange within the program demonstrate increased awareness of democratic values, social responsibility and active citizenship [4, p. 25]. These aspects are critically important for reducing cultural polarization, as they contribute to the development of mutual respect and intercultural dialogue. Another important consequence of participation in Erasmus+ is the increased interest in global issues. According to the study, many participants become more interested in social, political and economic topics after completing the project, which contributes to their openness to other cultures and points of view [4, p. 32]. In addition, the RAY LTE study emphasizes that international exchanges help reduce prejudice against representatives of other nations. Erasmus+ graduates are more likely to express a positive attitude towards cultural diversity, and also assess issues of social justice more objectively [4, p. 34]. Practical confirmation of the reduction of cultural polarization is the active civic engagement of program graduates. Many of them participate in public initiatives, volunteer movements and even political activities, which contributes to strengthening intercultural dialogue and reducing social isolation between different population groups [4, p. 38]. According to the study [5, p. 10], the Erasmus+ program contributes to increasing tolerance and reducing stereotypes about other cultures. The development of social cohesion is promoted by the Youth4Europe program, organized by the European Commission, which supports projects for young people from EU countries and neighboring regions; every young European aged 18 to 30 can join the program. Founded in 1963, the Cultural Vistas program develops programs that develop critical thinking skills to solve complex problems, improve intercultural awareness to build mutual understanding. This program gives young people from different countries the opportunity to participate in cultural exchanges, internships and volunteer programs in the USA and other countries. The main purpose is to create a global network that promotes the development of intercultural understanding and the fight against xenophobia. AIESEC is an international youth organization that conducts international exchanges aimed at developing leadership qualities in young people through volunteer projects and stages in other countries. The program allows participants from different cultures to interact and work together, overcome stereotypes and promote the development of intercultural communication. Intercultural Programs American Field Service (AFS) is an international voluntary non-governmental non-profit organization that provides intercultural learning opportunities. An exchange program that organizes short-term and long-term student exchanges for and with students from different countries. It includes cultural exchanges, internships, and volunteer

opportunities that help young people understand cultural differences and facilitate their integration into the global community. Global Village is an annual festival from the international youth organization AIESEC that helps lift the curtain on countless cultures of other countries. It is a program that gives young people from different cultural and social groups the opportunity to work together on joint projects. People tend to form prejudiced ideas about other cultures due to a limited amount of information. Psychologically, this is due to the confirmation bias effect, when people tend to accept only information that confirms their existing beliefs [6]. When a person directly communicates with representatives of another culture, it gives them a chance to change their ideas, to see a person beyond the stereotype. This, in turn, reduces psychological barriers that arise due to misunderstanding or fear of the new. During international exchanges, students can be involved in cultural projects, such as organizing holidays, participating in exhibitions, music or cinema, which allows them to view other cultures not through the prism of stereotypes, but through direct experience.

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