

PSYCHOLOGIA / PSYCHOLOGY

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THE VOICES OF YOUTH ON EUROPEAN IDENTITY, MEMBERSHIP AND VALUES FROM AN ASPIRING COUNTRY*

1. Introduction

Even though it is very hard to define exactly what European identity is, it is clear that EU-support requires some kind of positive identification with the EU¹. A body of literature² explains the willingness of states to adopt EU rules on the basis of potential benefits from EU membership. However, as Jacques Delors once observed, one does not fall in love with the internal market or the growth rate and it is very hard to imagine that the Europeanization can be reduced only to this kind of incentives. A competing explanation to the rationalistic model of rewarding relies on the social learning theory and constructivism which claim that states adopt European rules because they perceive them as being legitimate and in line with the core values and norms that society is organized around. In this view, candidate states adopt EU rules over time through socialization and the “state compliance results from social learning and deliberation that lead to preference change”³.

In her brilliant analysis of the success and failure to progress towards Europeanization of different countries that are otherwise similar, Subotić⁴ argues

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¹ R.K. Herrmann, M.B. Brewer, *Identities and Institutions. Becoming European in the EU*, in: R.K. Herrmann, T. Risse, M.B. Brewer (Eds.), *Transnational Identities. Becoming European in the EU*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004, pp. 1–22.

² For example: J. Kelley, *Ethnic Politics in Europe: The Power of Norms and Incentives*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

³ J.T. Checkel, *Why Comply? Social Learning and European Identity Change*, “International Organization” 2001, 55(3), 553–588, p. 560.

⁴ J. Subotić, *Europe is a State of Mind: Identity and Europeanization in the Balkans*. “International Studies Quarterly”, 55(2011), 309–330.

that there are two opposing mechanisms – one of identity convergence and the other of identity divergence. She maintains that *identity convergence* is a process by which domestic political actors strategically emphasize shared norms and values in pursuit of particular political goals, whereas *identity divergence* is a mechanism of resisting them and defining the national identity as being based on contrasting set of values. She further explains that in constructing divergent identification political elites should ensure that the idea is not universally shared, provide detailed alternative identity narrative (“we are different from Europeans”) and present the past relationship with the European countries as being more negative than positive. In our view, the recent developments in the Republic of Macedonia⁵ are clear example of a well elaborated strategy towards identity divergence. First of all, Euro-skeptical debates are not excluded from the public sphere. The electoral success is not built on an open anti-European agenda, but the firm position of not-giving-up-on-the-name is considered a necessary prerequisite. Furthermore, in the last several years, the nation witnessed a bold switch in the interpretation of their origins and history⁶ and the narrative of unjust treatment of the European Union and its bias towards Greece is frequently present in the media as a betrayal of its own values⁷. Thus, if the concept of Europeanization is defined as constructing shared beliefs and ways of political practice in Europe⁸, it could be said that the Republic of Macedonia is only half its way to achieve this goal.

Despite the proclaimed efforts of the official politics in the country to work towards the European integration, a growing disappointment about the success of the integration has caused a certain amount of scepticism that begun to slowly rise five years ago⁹ and is often expressed through the narrative of refusing to sacrifice the national identity and national interests in favour of joining the European family. At the same time, the sphere of education remained the one where the support for joining the EU has been clearly articulated and promoted, mainly by encouraging relevant values such as multiculturalism, tolerance, respect for human rights, and social responsibility within the official curricula.

⁵ The Republic of Macedonia has been accepted in the UN by the provisional name The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). Although we are fully aware that currently, the EU refers to Macedonia in official documents as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), in this paper, we also use terms Macedonia and Macedonians to refer the country and the ethnic majority group as it is called internally.

⁶ M. Soldić, *Ilinden: Linking a Macedonian past present and future*, in: Lj. Šarić, K. Gammelgaard, and K. Rå Hauge (Eds.), *Transforming National Holidays: Identity Discourse in the West and South Slavic Countries, 1985–2010*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2012, pp. 191–212.

⁷ CCRS, Centre for Culture and Cultural Studies. *The Scope and the Meaning of the term European Values as Used in the Macedonian Print Media*. Skopje: USAID and FOSIM, 2014.

⁸ P.J. Katzenstein, *Multiple Modernities as Limits to Secular Europeanization?*, in: T.A. Byrnes, and P.J. Katzenstein (Eds.), *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 111–131.

⁹ I. Damjanovski, *Public Opinion and Macedonia's Accession to the European Union (2004–2014)*. Skopje: Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis', Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; R. Manchin (2011). *Balkan public opinion and EU accession*, in: J. Rupnik (Ed.), *The Western Balkans and the EU: The hour of Europe*, Paris: Institute for Security Studies, 2014, pp. 163–168.

Taking into account the importance of identity issues, this research is trying to explore the perceptions and beliefs of young ethnic Macedonians regarding the EU, European and ethnic/national identity situated in an ambivalent societal context – an exposure to pro-European educational goals, together with the recently emerging reluctance towards joining the Union.

The aim of this study is to find out how this process of identity divergence that takes place as a prevailing discourse reflects on the EU identification in young people. It can also be seen as a continuation of a previous quantitative study on the effects of the formal educational efforts on the formation of the common European identity in ethnic Macedonian youth¹⁰, in that this study is carried out to further explore some of the findings of the previous study, especially young Macedonians' inclination towards identifying themselves intensely with the European values.

2. Method

Research on European identity has generally used quantitative methodology that mostly examines the impact of European identity on the support for European integration. Perhaps the most extensive and popular survey data – Eurobarometer – offers an excellent way to gain understanding into the extent to which different categories of people in the particular states identify with Europe. However, it hardly provides any data relevant to understanding what being European means to respondents. Therefore, when it comes to complex psychological processes as European identification, a quantitative analysis only scratches the surface and does not reveal any personal interpretations attached to such concepts. Having in mind the comprehensive critique of employing quantitative methods alone in examining identity issues¹¹, we decided to begin the examination of our research problem by using the qualitative approach.

2.1. Participants

In recruiting the participants for the focus groups, we were guided by the principle of heterogeneity in terms of field of study, place of living and gender. Twenty recruiters approached students from different Departments at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje¹² in order to invite them to participate in a research on European identity and integration until they

¹⁰ N. Kenig, O. Spasovski, *Far away but close enough: Possibilities for developing European identity in youth before becoming a member of the European Union*, in: P. Cunningham (ed.), *Identities and Citizenship Education: Controversy, crisis and challenges*, London: CiCe, 2013, pp. 453–465.

¹¹ S. Carey, *Undivided Loyalties: Is National Identity an Obstacle to European Integration?*, “European Union Politics” 2002, 3, 387–413; L. Hooghe, G. Marks, *Calculation, Community and Cues: Public Opinion on European Integration*, “European Union Politics” 2005, 6(4), 419–443.

¹² Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje is the largest university in the country, where more than half of the overall student population in the country is enrolled.

reached the recommended number of seven-eight participants. By using this strategy, 72 students (30 males and 42 females) between 19 and 22 years of age were intentionally recruited. The participants currently live in 13 different urban or rural areas in the country and declared themselves as being ethnic Macedonians¹³. All of them took part in the focus group discussion voluntarily, based on previously given informed consent and their participation did not involve any kind of compensation.

2.2. Procedure

Moderators conducted the focus group interviews by using a structured protocol of eight questions designed to explore participants' own views on the possibilities of Europeanization, European values and European vs. national identity. The core questions were the following:

1. What are your first associations for Europe and the European Union?
2. Let's say that tomorrow the country becomes a member of the EU. How do you imagine your life and the society in general?
3. Let's say that the country will *not* become an EU member for 30 years. How do you imagine life in these circumstances?
4. One can frequently hear about common European values that unite the different national cultures of EU members. What does that term mean for you?
5. Could you compare these European values with the values in this country? With which do you identify yourself more?
6. What does it mean for you to be a European?
7. Can one be a Macedonian and a European at the same time?
8. What would have happened if you, in the name of the Europeanization of the country, give up some values that are considered central to what it means to be Macedonian?

The participants were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time and leave the group. It has been guaranteed that all collected data will be destroyed after the completion of the research report.

The data gathering process was carried out in April and May 2015, by 20 moderators trained specifically for this purpose and who had also recruited the participants. The lengths of the focus group discussions were between one and one and a half hour. All discussions were recorded; participants' approvals were obtained prior to the actual recording. All focus groups were conducted at University premises. It should be noted that in more than half of the focus groups, moderators reported having difficulties to establish relaxed atmosphere.

¹³ The study is limited to ethnic Macedonians only due to limitations in resources. Having in mind that considerably different responses from the Albanian ethnic community in the country is expected, the results are conclusive only for the population of young ethnic Macedonians.

2.3. Analysis

The analysis of the responses was performed after thorough familiarization with both the audio-records and their transcripts that enabled us to code and then categorize them into dominant patterns and identify the themes¹⁴. Although we used the theoretical framework as guidance, we did not restrict ourselves entirely to it and remained open to the all ideas emerging from the text. The reliability of the categorization was confirmed by testing the inter-rater convergence. Only those patterned responses that were identified by the authors, who independently analyzed the data, are reported here.

3. Findings

The analytical results of the accounts showed that students tend to exhibit rather pessimistic self-concept of being only “wishful” European citizens. They revealed a clear idealization of the notion of the European Union and the shared European values even though it was very hard for them to define more precisely what they were. With almost no exception, they expressed bitter skepticism accompanied by noticeable feelings of inferiority and helplessness about the possibility of Macedonia’s integration in the EU. Since the focal point of the qualitative research was to identify the main themes that emerged from the focus group discussions, they will be presented along with the dimensions that define them.

The first theme that emerged from the students’ accounts is a strong idealization of the EU in terms of the living conditions within the union, or to be more exact, in the Western European countries. In this category, entitled *life in the EU is perfect*, the entity was connected first of all with prosperity, a high living standard, the rule of law, equality and security. Strikingly frequent, the descriptions of the EU were accompanied by sharp contrast of how their life or the behavior of the people in the country differs from those images. The following statements illustrate the general views related to this thematic category¹⁵:

To me, EU is a place where love, understanding and harmony prevail. There are equal rights for all with exclusion of even the slightest abuse. There, the laws are observed and everyone does as they should do and people are civilized. We are like Neanderthals and do not care about the laws – about nothing! (female, Psychology)

In Europe, you have a feeling that you exist. Here, you are nobody, you are non-existing. (female, IT)

To me, being a European means that you are empowered, that you mean something. It means nice life. (female, Special Education)

¹⁴ Only the selected quotes used to support the findings were subsequently translated in English. Note should be taken that in some quotes, as a result of the translation, certain intensity nuances in the semantics of the utterance captured by the communication and especially due to dialectal variety, is either lost or changed.

¹⁵ The presented quotes are those that best describe a general opinion about the identified themes. Due to space limitations, the views of those who did not share the general opinion are only summarized in the text. The identity of the respondents that are quoted is presented only through their gender and study department.

The EU membership was generally seen as an undeniable advantage, but only for those countries that share the core European values. Ten participants mentioned that there are exceptions to the “rule” that the EU membership brought about better life for their citizens. Bulgaria and Croatia were pointed out as such exceptions, which was then associated with a widely shared notion that different cultural and political traditions might actually interfere with the adequate implementation of all European standards. The observation of a gap between them and the countries of Western Europe, and the idea that this has not been visibly narrowed, especially not in Bulgaria which is a member of the Union quite some time now, also adds to the pessimism. Generally speaking, a vast majority of the participants expressed their disbelief that the Balkan countries could ever become “that kind of Europe”. This led us towards identifying another category epitomized in the statement ***the EU values are not inherently held by people here – they only pretend that they accept them.*** Not a single participant mentioned being socialized in accordance with the European values. Surprisingly, common European cultural or historical ties or even the concepts of shared roots have never been mentioned as basis for sharing or accepting those values. Nearly all of them perceive their own national identity as being based on very different sets of values and quite frequently they refer to the concept of “Balkan mentality” or “Balkan values”. The EU values are undoubtedly evaluated as being superior in comparison to the ones they have been exposed to, although, as few of them fear, they might lead to “being cold-blooded”. Many students argued that there is a sharp contrast between “our” and “their” (EU) values and norms and that those rules and laws that are in accordance with the EU values will never be fully accepted:

[The EU laws] are not compatible with our culture and way of life. They are simply imposed on' that's why we cannot observe them. (female, Pharmacy)

Macedonia is locked back in time for about 300 years ... we can only read about those values and see them implemented 4000 km away from us. I know for sure that there are people (here) that would like to live by these values and their mental capacity is different. But most of the people here destroy everything that comes from outside even if it is good because we function like that by default. (male, Law School)

However, it is worth noting that when describing the perceived differences, the vast majority of respondents tried to explicitly show repulsion and despise for the particular behaviour that stems from the so called “Balkan mentality”. Their emotional reactions made it more than obvious that they were trying to distance themselves from it, even though they claimed that it is a mainstream behaviour.

Only several participants stated that they see the unity between European member states and their common value system constructed through intentional efforts and unconsciously accepted. That is why they believe that maybe the next generations could become more Europeanized if raised in a context that supports those values. One of the students describes this in the following statement:

Let's say that if we give children proper values, values that they have to be tolerant for instance, there will be no conflicts anymore. On the other hand, children inherit the value system from their parents. Thus if the parents are supportive of the wrong values nothing will be achieved and that is why the education is very important. It can make the difference. (female, Pedagogy)

Contrary to these opinions, the majority of the participants expressed rather primordial beliefs in explaining the assessed value differences. Such paradigm is associated with clear skepticism about the possibility of Europeanization both on collective and individual level, followed by explicit distress related to it. One of the participants says:

I do not think it is possible at all. If you are Macedonian all your life, from birth, you cannot simply all of a sudden become a European. It is a different case if you were born as European. (male, Business and Economy)

The question of the (im)possibility of accession is obviously a burning issue. There is a clear tendency towards mythologizing the role of the union in the country's and their own future. Asked to compare their life in future where Macedonia is part of the EU as opposed to Macedonia staying out of the EU, nearly all participants reflected opposing views, quite frequently followed by profound misunderstanding of the role of the union. On the one hand, the membership in the union is perceived as a possibility for labor mobility, invaluable cultural and educational exchanges that might enhance their competences and chances for competitiveness on the labor market, recognition of real qualifications as opposed to employment solely based on loyalty towards the ruling party, implementation of laws unselectively and enhancing human rights. The vivid explanations of these advantages are in sharp contrast to the way some students assess the current state in the country:

I do not know exactly how it works, but I think that the EU will have stronger control over our politicians...the corruption will decrease, there will be less money laundering and things like that. (female, Business and Economy)

Maybe there will be many advantages for students like free transportation, free tuition or food, or more grants for studying abroad. (male, Pharmacy)

On the other hand, the possible scenario of failing to access is generally seen as an impasse for the country's development and is a source of profound anxieties. The following quotations illustrate the deep apprehension that goes along with the visions of the majority of the participants about how the future out of the EU might look like:

This torture performed against all of us will continue and we will sink deep in the misery where we are – deeper and deeper. Nothing will get better and more people will be losing their jobs, the families will be suffering as they do now and someone will be playing games with us as they will... (female, Law School)

It will simply be chaotic and I am afraid that we will not have enough even for food and other basic needs. (male, Engineering)

I will be proud of my unpaid labor and happy if I succeed in feeding my family. (female, Psychology)

We had implicitly assumed that a very strong sense of national identity would go hand in hand with a strong opposition to Europeanization. However, despite our expectations that these young people would voice some concerns about the possibility of losing their national identity in regards to the name issue, they seemed to feel quite comfortable with the idea that Europeanization does not present a threat to their national identity. On the contrary, some of them discussed the negative effects, especially of the exclusiveness of the concept of ethnic identity and advocated the idea that it should be made less relevant. Some of the participants pointed out that it is the citizenship that should matter because it leads towards cooperation and stability, whereas others could not see any connection or conflict between their own ethnic/national identity and the process of Europeanization. The majority of respondents believe that being part of the EU will be an element of their perceived identity along with their feeling of belonging to their own ethnic group. Some also make connections between citizenship and the supranational nature of the union, without mentioning that they feel potential threat to their national/patriotic feelings. One informant said:

Once we enter the Union, it will not be important anymore if you are a Macedonian, Albanian, Greek or whatever. We will all be Europeans with the same rights. And that is good, because it really should not matter. (male, IT)

In my opinion, being European means being a citizen, part of the European Union where the law is above any individual, regardless of what nationality, or whether they are someone with power or an ordinary citizen. We don't have it here. (male, Chemistry)

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that both the students who believe that joining the EU will bring about positive changes and those who think that the accession will not make any significant improvements are equally sceptical that the country will ever be accepted in the Union. Two possible explanations have been identified to account for the occurrence of such pessimistic views. The one is that the national politicians themselves benefit from the status quo situation, and the other one, mentioned by more participants, is an implicit notion that the country will not be accepted because the EU members are aware that it is nearly impossible to Europeanize the citizens. In all focus groups, there is a widespread belief that Western European norms and values are the core ones for the EU and that all Eastern European countries are treated more or less as outer groups, according to the intensity of their 'non-westerness'. They see the values and norms that prevail in the country as considerably different. Despite the expressed idealization of these values, their assessment is that it would be almost impossible to conform to them. The skepticism stems both from the recent happenings in the political sphere and examples from everyday behavior:

I think that in a country where when one steals can say "well I stole so what" and where people are not ashamed but proud to claim that they got their jobs only because they are party members, or (a politician) says that they will eat people alive in order to come to power, it is hardly possible (to Europeanize)...I simply see no way in which we can go further. (female, Business and Economy)

We are far away locked in the past and in our traditional norms...and it is strange that people claim that they would like to become Europeans while at the same time they are not ready to give up their old traditional values and beliefs. (female, Security studies)

At this point, all participants who expressed pro-EU feelings see ***no light at the end of the tunnel for the European future of the country***. They present considerably dark picture of the present situation coupled with stressed pessimism for future developments. Asked what the solution for this might be, nearly all of them agreed that the only possible response is to be found on an individual rather than the collective level. They mentioned frequently that they might consider leaving the country and trying their luck in the western world. One student summarizes that they are unable to provide a meaningful answer of what might happen in the next ten years or what could be done because “*most (of them) do not see the future here, but somewhere abroad*”, while another has made this overall feeling of powerlessness even more explicit – “*all those who are reasonable and clever will leave*”.

4. Discussion

Psychological processes of identification assume that one must have an image of the entity that represents a model to identify with. It seems that for this group of young people, the EU as an entity for identification is an ideal model but at the same time it is frightening because it is unattainable. Furthermore, in positive identification with the EU, one has to perceive congruity between their values, ideas and beliefs and those ascribed to the EU¹⁶. This perceived harmony has been exhibited in several previous quantitative studies¹⁷, albeit not without a restraint that there might be a considerable inclination towards socially desirable responding. The new insight captured with the method applied in this research is that this perceived sameness, for the pro-European oriented individuals refers more to remote idealistic identification (‘how I would like us to be’) than to empathetic identification (‘what I think we really are’). In addition, the ambivalence in identification and the expressed hopelessness were dominant themes in the respondents’ accounts, especially among those who expressed themselves favourably for the EU inclusion. We believe this suggests that the unfavourable conditions of created divergence between the EU values with the ones that constitute the national identity, coupled with the mixed messages and implicit or explicit resistance inside the EU to enlargement, resulted in such

¹⁶ P. Huyst, *We have made Europe, now we have to make Europeans: Researching European identity among Flemish youth*, “Journal of Contemporary European Research” 2008, 4(4), 286–302.

¹⁷ For example: S. Bianchini, *Macedonia and the EU: Reshaping Social Values in Fluid Times*, in: S.P. Ramet, O. Listung, A. Simkus (Eds.), *Civic and Uncivic Values in Macedonia, Value Transformation, Education and Media*, New York: Palgrave, 2013, pp. 64–85; S. Klekovski, A. Kržalovski, D. Stojanova, *Macedonian Social Values*, Skopje: Centre for International Cooperation, 2010; N. Kenig, O. Spasovski, *Far away but close enough...*

challenging effects of the Europeanization process. Similar developments have already been disclosed in several other countries in the period prior to their EU integration¹⁸ suggesting the necessity of incorporating these phenomena into theorizing the possibilities of pre-accession Europeanization.

Situated in a context of prolonged ambiguity and wider identity divergent processes and faced with conflicting messages from the media and the formal educational system, these young people respond with a profound feeling of *otherness* and see themselves living an accomplished life only *out of the country*. In contrast to this, the small proportion of Euro-skeptical informants does not exhibit ambivalence and reproduce the main rhetoric of the identity divergence strategy in their accounts – the alleged unjust treatment of the European Union and the alternative identity narrative.

Our findings have also suggested that it is not always the best solution to conceptualize a potential identification with Europe as necessarily being mutually exclusive with nation-state identity. Even in a context of perceived (or imposed) direct threat to the national identity, we could not identify a straightforward negative link between nation-state and European identifications. This finding corresponds to the already identified complex links between these variables¹⁹. We postulate that this harmonization between the national and European identity in EU supporters is a result of the perceived role of the EU as a serious challenge for survival of what is observed as an authoritarian regime unwilling to establish the rule of law and to a certain extent, a guarantee for better standard of living, security and human rights.

SUMMARY

This research is trying to explore the perceptions and beliefs of young ethnic Macedonians regarding the EU, European and ethnic/national identity situated in an ambivalent societal context – an exposure to pro-European educational goals, together with the recently emerging reluctance towards joining the Union.

72 students with different study backgrounds at the age between 19 and 22 participated in the study. In 10 focus groups, formed on the basis of homogeneity of the field of study, they were discussing their views on the EU concept and their reflections on the congruities and incongruities between their national identity and the EU identity.

Results show that respondents tend to idealize the concept of EU and are willing to accept European citizenship. On the other hand, some are skeptical and question the possibility of developing European identity and citizenship because they perceive a serious gap between the European values and the values that are dominant in the current public and political discourse.

KEY WORDS: European values, European identity, qualitative analysis

¹⁸ F. Schimmelfennig, U. Sedelmeier, *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell Studies in Political Economy, Cornell University Press, 2005.

¹⁹ S. Carey, *Undivided Loyalties: Is National Identity...*; L. Hooghe, G. Marks, *Does Identity or Economic Rationality Drive Public Opinion on European Integration?* “Political Science and Politics” 2004, 37, 415–20; A. Štulhofer, *Euro-scepticism in Croatia: on the far side of rationality?* in: K. Ott (Ed.), *Croatian accession to the European union: the challenges of participation*, Zagreb: Institute of Public Finance, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2006, pp. 141–161.