European Identity and Erasmus mobility. Insights from Romanian Students’ Experiences

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Abstract:

The present paper approaches the relationship between European identity and other components of the identity of young educated EU citizens in intercultural contexts. Specifically, this study reveals how different layers of individual and collective identification co-exist and become prominent during short-time academic sojourns abroad. Emphasis is placed on the European sense of belonging and the contexts that favor its assuming.

Literature dedicated to exploring European student mobility as a potential source in fostering a European identity has started to grow lately. However, very few studies have tried to test empirically the assumption that students’ academic stages abroad increase their attachment to Europe. Likewise, empirical findings seldom discuss experiences of international students from the new Member States, such as Romania.

In this context, the present paper focuses on Romanian students who have been enrolled in the Erasmus exchange program and have performed, during the last 3 or 4 years, an academic mobility of several months in Belgium, Germany and Italy. By means of 17 in-depth interviews, conducted between January and March 2011, this study explored the relationship between the various layers of students’ identity (such as local, national, European etc), highlighting and discussing the situations when each of them became accentuated abroad. Two research questions guided the analysis: To what extent do Romanian students activate a European identity in intercultural environments? What are the contexts that promote the assuming of a European identity and the identification with the European Community for the Romanian Erasmus students?

Drawing on recent studies that affirm the emergence of a European sense of self in younger generations especially (Bruter, 2005, Fligstein, 2009, Risse, 2010), this research starts from the premise that people and, particularly, young educated mobile people possess multiple identities, among which a European one, if they are citizens of the EU. Although

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weak, the European identity is considered to be something more than a “theoretical construction”, therefore it may become prominent in certain circumstances.

Findings showed that, while abroad, students actualized different layers of identity in different situations, depending on the roles they assumed and the individuals they interacted with. Although national and group identity were the most powerful ones, in certain contexts, Romanian students perceived themselves as Europeans, if only as a second or third nature.

Key-words: European identity, Romanian identity, Erasmus mobility, short-term sojourners, intercultural contexts

Introduction:

In the recent years, European student mobility has been widely seen as an instrument that fosters a European identity from below (Wallace, 1990, Green, 2007, Fligstein, 2008, 2009, Favell, 2009). The authors in this line draw on ideas expressed decades ago by Karl Deutsch and colleagues (1968/1957), who saw the increased cross-border mobility of people as one of the essential conditions for the success of international integration and the formation of a “we-feeling” among different peoples (Hewstone, 1986: 10). Thus, at least theoretically, the more people engage in cultural exchanges and interactions by crossing the borders to study, work, live or visit other European countries the better the prospects for a European identity (Sigalas: 2009: 5).

However, in spite of the widely acknowledged pivotal role played by the educational exchange programs in fostering a European identity among students, the studies approaching these issues empirically are very limited in number (King, Ruiz-Gelices, 2003, Sigalas, 2009, Van Mol, 2011). Similarly, although some scholars agree that nowadays increasing numbers of young educated people incorporate Europe into their sense of identity (Bruter, 2005, Favell, 2009, Fligstein, 2008, 2009, Risse, 2010, Wintle, 2011), there are few empirical studies to reveal who exactly are those people, why some of them feel more European than others and what are the contexts in which young people perceive themselves as Europeans. The present paper addresses this gap by means of qualitative analysis, centering on identifying the situations in which 17 Erasmus students from Romania are likely to assume a European identity. Moreover, the way in which European identity works in relation to the national sense of self and other possible identifications is also analyzed.

The study falls into 4 parts: the first part introduces and defines the concept of European identity, distinguishing between its civic and cultural components. The second part
is dedicated to European student mobility and the role it plays in fostering a common European sense of self. The third section presents the methodology used in this study, highlighting strengths as well as limitations of the in-depth semi-structured interviews. Finally, the last part of the paper reveals and discusses the main empirical findings, drawing some new directions for further research.

**European identity today. Theoretical background**

The literature dedicated to European identity is extremely vast, but it is not founded on a well-defined concept that is widely accepted among researchers. The constant debate over this topic in the academic circles, in the political arena or the mass media forwarded multiple and diverse claims that either affirm or deny the existence of a European identity as a real entity. However, most of the recent works in the field argue that a European identity has progressively emerged over the past decades and continues to grow nowadays (Bruter, 2005, Green, 2007, Risse, 2010). Consequently, more and more people include Europe into their sense of identity.

But who are the people who perceive themselves as Europeans (if only as a second or third nature) and what does it mean to be or feel European in contemporary Europe? These questions were asked and answered by many scholars and politicians, who have tried to find out which are the features that distinguish all Europeans, regardless of their national or local differences. Among the various opinions that were expressed in this concern, what seems to be a common point in recent research is that Europeans are more likely to be the young, educated, mobile citizens, who speak foreign languages, have higher incomes and travel across borders for business, school or holidays (Arts, Halman, 2006, Favell, 2009, Fligstein, 2009). Being also “aggressively non-nationalistic” (Stanley, 1998 *apud* Green, 2007: 72), they are living in a Europe where “cooperation and integration, the single market and Schengen Agreement have largely erased the meaning of national boundaries other than as linguistic markers, and where travel and study abroad is vastly more commonplace than it was even one generation prior” (Green, 2007: 87).

A particular category of these “new Europeans” is represented by the students performing internships or academic mobility abroad, in intercultural environments. Lately, they are increasingly perceived as promoting “discreetly” but “firmly” a common European identity from below, in that having the opportunity to learn firsthand about other European people and cultures, they realize that they share many things, interests and preoccupations with their counterparts around Europe. And their positive interactions, scholars say, increase
students’ attachment to Europe and cause some of them to identify themselves as Europeans. The empirical section of this paper will reveal whether this is the case for the participants in this study, discussing those specific situations that determine Romanian students’ identification with Europe and the EU.

Another important aspect of the present research is related to the operationalization of the concept of European identity. What does it mean to be or feel European and how can European identity be measured in order to affirm that some people are European or more European than others? These questions have given rise to complex discussions among researchers who remain “divided over the significance of European identity in everyday lives” (Van Mol, 2011: 31). Taking the constructionist perspective on identity (Berger, Luckman, 1966, Haar, 2002), and applying theories of multiple identities, in the context of the present paper, European identity represents a “multilevel identity which does not exclude other “identities”, other “loyalties”, from local ones to national ones (Varsori, Petricioli, 2004: 90). Put differently, being European does not oppose to being French or Dutch or Romanian because, as research shows (Smith, 1992, 1993, Wintle, 2000, 2005, Straubhaar, 2008), people articulate several identities, among which local, regional, national or supra-national and (even) global senses of self, as well as social, religious, ethnic, and other senses of self that define different but co-existing identities. All these specific facets of identity are not mutually incompatible, but rather different layers of identification, highlighted or left in shadow according to time, place or situation. As argued by Brubaker and Cooper, “self- and other-identification are fundamentally situational and contextual” (2000: 14), therefore the various circumstances in which individuals find themselves and the different roles that they play are relevant in the process of identification. And this happens because, above all, identity is not a static but a dynamic entity “formed by social processes and reshaped by social relations” (Berger, Luckman, 1966: 194); it is a process open to change, constructed and renegotiated in interaction (Jenkins, 2000, Grundy, Jamieson, 2005), when individuals choose and oscillate between their multiple identifications.

In order to measure empirically the European identity as experienced by the participants in this study, the concept will be understood and analyzed in its civic and cultural components (Bruter, 2005: 104-107, Wintle, 2005). The civic identity refers to citizens’ sense of belonging to the EU as an institutional, economic and political framework, which defines some of their rights, obligations and liberties. Cultural identity, on the other hand, applies to Europe as a whole, as a continent of shared civilization. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, students’ references to the EU and the “advantages” brought along by the EU membership
will be interpreted as evidence for the existence of a civic European identity; at the same time, the perception of students that they feel closer and attached to Europe in general and to fellow Europeans than to non-Europeans will provide evidence for the fact they assume a cultural European identity.

**Erasmus student mobility and its assumed role in fostering a European identity**

A strong reason to study European identity in relation to student mobility is the need to provide insights into aspects of a phenomenon that is largely debated but still under-analyzed empirically. In spite of the central role that European student mobility is supposed to play in generating a common European sense of belonging, the research conducted to explore the extent to which students who have performed academic mobility in Europe are likely to assume a European identity is very limited. Moreover, existing research on the subject hardly focuses on samples of “mobile students” from the new Member States. In this context, studying the direct experiences that Erasmus students from Romania have of Europe and the way these experiences are connected with a European identity proves highly relevant.

Erasmus has become the largest and the most successful organized exchange program in Europe. Scholarship agrees that it means and has always meant much more than just an educational program; rather, it has reached the status of a social and cultural phenomenon (King, Ruiz-Gelices, 2003, Sigalas, 2009). Through Erasmus, about 150,000 students study abroad every year (Sigalas, 2009, Van Mol, 2011), having the opportunity to meet and interact with different people from different cultures, to improve language learning and intercultural skills, to enrich their lives in the academic, personal and professional fields.

Said argued that “Erasmus is European integration, more than anything else” ([apud Green, 2007: 86]), and Eco, in a recent interview retrieved from *The Guardian*, insisted that Erasmus has created “the first generation of young Europeans”, adding that the Erasmus idea should be compulsory for workers too, from taxi drivers to plumbers and others for, in order to integrate, they need to spend some time in other countries within the EU.

As previously mentioned, these ideas are common in the current literature on European identity feelings, but they are rarely grounded empirically. It remains thus an open space for further research to prove whether the Erasmus experience and the intercultural contacts generate a common European sense of belonging among the students who perform such an exchange. However, the present paper’s intention is not that of measuring the influence the mobility stage had on creating a European identity for the Romanian Erasmus students. Rather, it starts from the assumption that the academic sojourn abroad facilitates the
enforcement of certain layers of identification that students already possessed in different forms and degrees. Put differently, I argue that Romanian students enter higher education with multiple identities that reflect their social, ethnic and cultural origins. Additionally, their academic intercultural experience is hypothesized to play a significant role in making them more aware of some of their multiple layers of identification, by creating new situations when they become important and prominent. Among these various identities, the European identity may be highlighted by several contexts during students’ short-time sojourn abroad.

Methodology

This study investigates the assumed European identity perceived by short-term sojourners in a foreign European cultural environment, and the particular situations that determine students’ identification as Europeans. The focus of the study is represented by Romanian students’ perspectives and recent experiences abroad.

The research questions guiding the analysis refer to different layers of identity as highlighted by the intercultural experience: To what extent do Romanian students activate a European identity in intercultural environments? What are the contexts that promote the assuming of a European identity and the identification with the European Community for the Romanian Erasmus students?

In order to answer these questions I have chosen the qualitative analysis, and particularly the semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews focused on Romanian students aged between 21 and 24, who were enrolled in the Erasmus exchange program in the last 3 to 4 years. 17 students who have performed academic mobility in Germany, Belgium and Italy participated in this study voluntarily, without being offered any financial incentives. The interviews, which lasted between 35 and 65 minutes, were designed to look informal and free, in spite of a quite precise interview guide. They were conducted between January and March 2011 in Bucharest, and recorded for further analysis.

Students were asked about their personal experience of Europe, with an emphasis on their experience as Erasmus students. They were asked about living in other European countries, meeting and interacting with fellow Europeans, noticing similarities and differences in terms of culture, history, customs, traditions etc. All the students were encouraged to talk about the stereotypes they had about living in Europe and about other Europeans before going to study abroad and the extent to which these stereotypes were confirmed during their academic sojourn. They were also asked about the stereotypes they were associated with by other internationals and about their reaction to those stereotypical patterns of thinking.
The questions in the interview guide were designed considering that peoples’ European identity derives from their perceptions of Europe (Bruter, 2005), themselves influenced by the images they form of Europe directly, by means of their own personal experience, or indirectly, by mediation. And the semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to gain a better knowledge and understanding of what these perceptions are, how images and ideas about Europe and the Europeans are formed, analyzed and interpreted, and how people connect them with a European sense of identity. Briefly, one of the main purposes of the present research was to establish what direct experience students have of Europe and how it influences their levels of European identity.

**Strengths and limitations of the study**

Following De Fina (2003: 3), I argue that a qualitative perspective is much more insightful than quantitative methodologies because it helps understanding aspects that are not apparent through statistics or questionnaires. More important, qualitative studies on Erasmus students’ identity abroad are scarce in general, and especially when it comes to students from the new Member States. Although institutional, educational or financial aspects of Erasmus mobility have made the object of many studies, questions related to self and other perception during academic mobility are relatively neglected. Thus, the importance of gaining knowledge on Erasmus students’ self-perception and identity, which was also recognized by scholars in the field. King and Ruiz-Gelices argued, for instance, that a more sophisticated analysis of the personal, social and academic experiences that students undergo during their mobility can be achieved only by in-depth interviewing of international students, together with participant observation research (2003: 247).

However, the methodological limitations of a study based on interviews must be also mentioned. Among them, the most significant are: the relatively reduced number of participants and the subjective, personal character of the collected data. It is important to acknowledge that even if the information obtained at this level is accurate and relevant for the category it represents, it is always private and the result of a context. Thus, it cannot be generalized without certain reserves. Another limit of the present study is the “subject bias” of the respondents. Specifically, in the selection of the relevant students, there were no efforts made in order to eliminate or diminish the risk of subject bias, by not recruiting respondents from “risky” disciplines such as social sciences and humanities. This means that, to some extent, Romanian students’ attitudes and answers may be influenced by their degree specialization.
Findings and discussion

As mentioned from the beginning, the purpose of this paper is to study the extent to which European identity (both civic and/or cultural) is assumed by Romanian Erasmus students who have spent one academic semester abroad, during the last 3 to 4 years. The emphasis is placed on the contexts that generated the actualization of such an identity for the participants in this study, while also revealing what they mean by being European. Findings indicate that students actualized several layers of identity, which were highlighted or left in shadow according to specific contexts and situations. Among the various identities they experienced as sojourning students, respondents mentioned national and group identity as the most prominent ones. European identity was also experienced by most students in certain circumstances, while other sporadically discussed identity layers were regional identity (Eastern European identity as different and somehow opposed to Western European identity) and local identity (stressed in the discussions between Romanian colleagues).

A first important aspect to be noticed is that, with very few exceptions, respondents experienced the national identity as the most powerful identifier during their mobility stage. 13 out of 17 students felt Romanian in the first place, and some of them felt Europeans as a second or third nature and only in certain circumstances: “I felt Romanian most of the times; this concept of “European” was introduced in my education later, it is not internalized yet” (Armina, Belgium); “I felt Romanian fore and foremost. I remember an exercise about this. We had to write down quickly, from the top of our minds, words to describe us, and for me it was something like “Romanian”, “student”; I would have never thought of “European”, and neither did anybody else; from what I can remember, everybody mentioned his/her nationality” (Silvia, Belgium);

Many students revealed that, during their sojourn abroad, they identified themselves with their homeland in spite of the negative images so often associated with Romania by other internationals or/and locals: “I felt Romanian, but in the negative way. When I was speaking Romanian with other colleagues in a store, the sales persons would immediately change their attitudes, in the sense that they would keep an eye on us all the time and even follow us” (Anca, Germany). Actually, students were proud to be Romanian and tried to promote, mostly through personal example, a different image of the country. They insisted that Romania can no longer be reduced and perceived by foreigners only in the light of the same old negative stereotypes presented in some movies or in the media news: “I have tried to fight stereotypes about my country and people… I have never forgotten that I was a representative of Romania there and did my best to leave a good impression behind” (Miruna, Italy)
Romanian identity was very visible and enforced in intercultural contexts, mostly while sharing cultural experiences with other international students and, sometimes, with local students or people too: “I felt Romanian almost all the time and I even improved my opinions about Romanians and our country. As I said, I arrived there with some prejudices… in fact I believe that all my Romanian colleagues had prejudices about themselves and a very good opinion about the Westerns especially, that was not confirmed in the end. And then I felt really Romanian and I said to myself: ‘look how many good things we have in Romania and we don’t really appreciate them’” (Roxana, Belgium).

European identity was experienced by Romanian Erasmus students in different contexts, but mostly during their interactions with students or people from other continents, when, as one of the students mentioned, cultural differences between European countries became insignificant as compared to those between continents. This opinion was shared by the great majority of respondents and very well captured by Miruna (Italy) who said: “I felt European and different as opposed to my colleagues from other continents; I was also curious and eager to learn as much as possible about them, because I knew there were lots of cultural differences between us”. All the students that had the opportunity to interact with other internationals from Asia, USA, South Africa etc. pointed to significant cultural differences which sometimes made communication and interaction difficult: “With the Chinese there was absolutely no connection, no tie, for they are completely ‘closed’ in their community […] there were many Chinese students on Campus, but one could not see any to come in a club or to eat in the cafeteria, with the rest of us” (Raluca, Germany). Another similar opinion was given by Mihaela, who went to Germany: “It was a lot more difficult for us to identify with people from outside Europe […] there were the students from China or Africa with whom we did not have to do much. […] They only spent time with each other”. A sense of a European common belonging seems to be created or accentuated mostly by reference to people from outside Europe. This is an important empirical finding confirming the theories that affirm the dual nature of “identity”, a concept providing the necessary delimitation between self and others, between in-groups and out-groups.

A strong European identity was felt by students when they traveled freely in Europe, without many formalities. The following quotations reinforce this point: “I was European there; I have experienced a great freedom and this is the first thing I associate with the European citizenship - the freedom of travel; I have always traveled freely inside Europe without showing my ID card or passport. And I was respected” (Irina, Belgium); “I felt European when I traveled, not depending on borders or visas anymore. And, I found many
different brands (in Germany) which I recognized because they offer products I could eventually provide at home too” (Sorana, Germany); “The fact that I could travel freely around Europe, without a visa, made me feel European. I realized then that joining the EU was a positive thing, because I visited France and England and The Netherlands as if I had gone from Bucharest to Focșani” (Roxana, Belgium). This finding confirms again one of the beliefs that manifested themselves repeatedly in interviews conducted in the field - that the ease of travel regulations inside the continent is building affinities towards Europe and the EU, increasing peoples’ attachment to the European Community.

At the same time, another context that highlighted the European identity of students referred to short visits at the European Parliament. Three students mentioned these occasions as relevant for their identification with Europe and the European Community: “I felt European from time to time. I had school trips to Brussels and visited the European Parliament and then I had the feeling that we are part of this big thing. I don’t think I would have felt the same elsewhere” (Armina, Belgium); “I felt European a few times… I think when I visited the European Parliament… and mostly when I could travel freely… yes, you could travel very freely, if you wanted to go on the French coast because it was sunny outside you could just go” (Ana, Belgium).

However, almost all Romanian Erasmus students (with one exception who declared herself only European) experienced both Romanian and European identities, very often a mix of them: “It was a mix of European and national identity, and a lack of identity when I got back to Romania” (Armina, Belgium); “With my Erasmus group I felt more Romanian, I was representing Romania. But when it came to shopping, traveling or just interacting with people I met on the street I was a European citizen” (Dumitrița, Belgium); “It was something between national and European identity. I am very flexible, I adapt easily.” (Mihaela, Germany). Some students underlined the ‘civic’ aspect of European integration and the logic of feeling European by simply being part of this political and economic structure.

Besides the identification with their homeland and with Europe which, as already mentioned, were contextual and situational, many Romanian students talked about the group identity – their identity as Erasmus students. Although Erasmus students came from all over Europe, having a different cultural background, the fact that they all shared the same status – that of international students, of “foreigners” in a host cultural environment – helped them cope more easily with the challenges imposed by the new culture. The Erasmus identity was

\[^2\text{Focșani is a small town in the South East Romania}\]
made prominent by different events that the host university program offered to all international students, by them all living together in most cases, and the simple fact that Erasmus students felt similar and close to each other just by being Erasmus: “We never felt excluded, but it is true, we were hanging out all the time with other Erasmus students” (Raluca P., Belgium); “I was always an Erasmus student there; we were different, we looked different, everybody treated us differently, not in a negative sense though… I mean they were always very nice to us, we tried to speak Dutch they answered back in English” (Roxana, Belgium).

Other layers of identity brought into discussion only sporadically were the East-European identity: “Maybe more than Romanian I felt East-European, because our Western colleagues treated us (their Eastern counterparts) in the same way” (Ana, Belgium), and the regional identity: “The overall national identity was followed, in my case, by the regional identity, the Transylvanian identity. I mean, I felt some cultural differences between me and my colleagues from Constanța³” (Bogdan, Germany).

Discussing the various contexts that highlighted or shadowed different facets of students’ identity, it is very important to mention that the multiple identities they experienced did not compete directly with each other. The national, group, and European identity, as well as some other facets of their identities, were all important at some point, and students could not say that one excluded the others. Rather, they experienced their national sense of self most of the times, but they also accentuated a European sense of belonging in some contexts, although it was less prominent, and seldom brought to the fore.

This research makes very explicit the fact that most participants in the study perceived themselves as Europeans in some situations, even if this identification was weaker than their national one. At the same time, the empirical findings offer evidence for both civic and cultural dimensions of European identity that were accentuated in different forms and degrees by most respondents. Experiencing a European sense of self in contexts such as traveling freely in an increasingly borderless Europe was considered an argument in favor of the presence of a civic European identity among Romanian Erasmus students. Also, pointing to cultural differences between people from inside and outside Europe, as well as discovering common reference points for the Europeans is strong evidence that demonstrates the presence of a cultural European sense of belonging among many respondents. In fact, interacting with their European colleagues made respondents realize that they shared many things which were

³ Constanța is a city in the South East of Romania
not obvious before their sojourning experience. Thus, they spoke about the common market they became aware of when they discovered in the host environment products or supermarkets already familiar to them. Respondents also mentioned that certain holidays and traditions they considered to be Romanian (e.g. Dragobetele⁴) are celebrated as well in other parts of Europe but on different dates and under different names (Dumitrița, Belgium). In the same context, somebody mentioned the *All Saints* as common celebration for Catholic countries. Finally, students found that the European cuisine includes many dishes that are common to different countries within Europe and, although they may be called or labeled differently, they are prepared similarly and taste quite the same.

The last aspect mentioned here is related to what participants in this survey defined as “European”. Though students’ answers were slightly different, most of them referred to Europe and the Europeans in terms of values such as: freedom of travel, respect, tolerance, cosmopolitanism, civilization, co-operation, cross-cultural mixing: “I felt European because Europe is the model of the civilized world even for Americans […]. Europe represents a major, dominant culture in the world” (Alexandru, Germany); “I felt part of Europe, I consider myself civilized enough to be part of this great civilization” (Livia, Italy). Others insisted that being European is about sharing a common culture and history and also about accepting differences and influences between Europeans: “Europe means culture, a common history and mutual influences between its peoples” (Raluca P., Belgium).

**Conclusions**

Romanian Erasmus students who studied in Europe actualized several layers of identity, which were mostly determined by the various circumstances they found themselves in and the roles they assumed. Overall, respondents distinguished between a group identity (labeled by themselves “Erasmus identity” or “international students’ identity”) and an individual identity experienced differently, depending on context and situation. Consequently, Erasmus students mentioned actualizations of their national identity (which was the most powerful and dominating identity while abroad), as well as actualizations of a European sense of self (both civic and cultural), emphasizing different circumstances when each of them became prominent.

A major finding is that feelings of Europeanness are not incompatible with national or other loyalties for the participants in this study. Very often, as this paper reveals, one level of

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⁴ Dragobetele is celebrated in Romania on February the 24th, and is considered to be the equivalent of *Valentine’s day*. 
loyalty within an identity may be stronger than another, but this doesn’t mean that the weaker levels are entirely eclipsed. Instead, students’ primary loyalties are, in most of the cases, to their nation and, at the same time, some of them feel attached to supranational institutions, regions, and continents such as the EU and Europe.

It is important that further research undertake an international comparative dimension, as this has not been too often explored by previous studies. How does the experience of Romanian students abroad compare with that of students coming from other countries in Europe? How does the experience abroad of students from new Member States compare with that of students from old Member States? Answering these questions represents the focus of my next paper.

Bibliography


