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THE STUDENT MOBILITIES AS A FACTOR FOR DEVELOPING EUROPEAN IDENTITY

**Студентската мобилност като фактор за развитие
на европейска идентичност**

Abstract: Since their creation, the student mobilities under *Erasmus* Programme have had as their goal the promotion of the academic and cultural exchange, as well as the support of developing European identity and the feeling of belonging to the European Union. Nevertheless, there are few studies proving how the participation in the programme affects the development of European identity. This paper aims at contributing to the generation of more knowledge on this issue by presenting results from a scientific research aiming to detect the impact of *Erasmus+* Programme on the language skills and the European identity of students from SU “St. Kliment Ohridski” who have participated in mobilities under the Erasmus+ Programme during the period 2015–2019. The methodology includes various quantity and quality methods, including a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with participants in the programme.

Keywords: student mobility; *Erasmus+* Programme; European identity

1. Introduction

This paper is written under a project* of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” aiming to study the impact of the *Erasmus+* Programme on the language skills, the process of European identity construction and the contemporary educational policies.

The aim of this paper is to study how the participation in the programme affects the development of European identity. For this purpose, first, we are going to make a brief review on the literature concerning European identity, as well as on some seminal studies on the impact of the programme on the development of European identity. Then, we are going to present the results of our project study on this impact.

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2. Theoretical background

2.1. *Defining European Identity*

Asking the question *How many Europes?*, H. Wallace¹ refracts his idea of Europe (and respectively of the European integration) through three different dimensions:

- *functional* – comprising areas of public policy and private exchange;
- *territorial* – comprising issues related to internal and external security, relations with the neighbours and management of the borders;
- *affiliational* – comprising questions of values, culture, ideas and identity.

The transnational models of linkages in Western Europe are formed around these three dimensions, and their level of institutionalization reflects how “deep” the European integration is². However, key for the European integration remains the European identity, as it is crucial for maintaining the civil society at a European level and hence – for reducing democratic deficit, essential for maintaining social solidarity and important for the global democracy³.

In order for us to analyze the concept of European identity, we have to clarify what exactly stays behind it. There are many theories and debates on what is and what is not the European identity (among the most significant authors we can mention Smith⁴, Wallace⁵, Хабермас⁶, Shore⁷, Cerutti⁸, Bruter⁹, Delanty¹⁰, Delanty & Rumford¹¹, Zielonka¹², Herrmann & Brewer¹³, Lucarelli & Manners¹⁴, Checkel & Katzenstein¹⁵, Risse¹⁶, Diez Medrano¹⁷, Стойчева¹⁸ and others). Despite the numerous works in this area, however, in the academic and political fields there is not a unified definition explaining clearly what European identity is.

According to some researchers, this vagueness in defining the concept is due to the different ideas we have when talking about “Europe” – Europe as a geographical area or an area for shared culture, Europe as an administrative zone and a zone for joint political decisions, or Europe as an area of sharing common values¹⁹, and to the fact that until the 19th century Europe hasn’t been well enough defined so its identity could not be articulated²⁰, to the frequent change of the notions “identity” and “identification”, as well as to the adoption of the concept as a global concept, which can be hardly defined in such a way “so that it contains in itself the definition of our reality and our ideas”²¹. Also, it is important for our research to clarify whether the European identity can be compatible with other collective identities of a similar type (national, ethnic, regional, etc.), or whether it is in conflict with them.

Despite the ambiguity in the academic field, we are going to make an attempt for a typology of some major European identity theories, as we are going to group them in accordance with two key indicators: 1) components/attributes of the concept “European identity”; and 2) the relationship of the European identity with other similar collective identities (national identity; regional identity).

The European identity is often viewed on the basis of other political identities – most often on the basis of national identity, as well as of the ethnic identities included in it. Generally speaking, the European identity is a collective identity related to the identification with Europe and/or the EU leading to a sense of belonging

and emotional attachment to the EU or to Europe²². Namely due to the fact that some scholars view European identity as related to Europe, others – as related to the EU, and third – to related to both, there comes this ambiguity in the definitions, although it is getting more and more popular to identify Europe with the European Union²³.

2.2. *Components of European identity*

To make a typology of the theories on European identity, it is necessary first to clarify their components. In Smith²⁴ for the concept “European identity“ is used an analogy with the concept “national identity“. According to Anthony Smith, in the European Union there are no common myths and historical memories, a common language and common mass culture. This gives him the reason to claim that there can't exist European identity on the basis of the national identity, as the European Union is different from the nation, it is an organization *sui generis*, therefore the identification with it would cause an identity *sui generis*²⁵.

M. Bruter²⁶ views both national and European identity as types of *political identity*. According to him, political identity is not just a continuation of the social identity, but is rather a matter of status or citizenship. It includes elements of both personal and social identity. He describes two perspectives explaining citizens' identity towards the existing political communities (such as the European Union):

- **cultural** – the individual's sense of belonging to a certain political group, on the basis of culture, values, religion, ethics and ethnicity;

- **civil** – citizens' identification with a political structure, such as a state, on the basis of institutions, rights and rules.

Delanty²⁷ is very skeptical in relation to the cultural basis of the European identity. He thinks that the idea of Europe has a cultural value, but it doesn't have a concrete form of identity. Therefore, it is not right the idea of Europe to be used in the processes of constructing political identity, as the different identities are used as means for reproducing dominant ideologies based on opposition and denial of the Other and binary typology is introduced. Delanty claims that the European collective identity can exist only on the basis of citizenship. Nevertheless, he thinks it exists at the different levels to a bigger or lesser extent. Later, Delanty²⁸ accepts as a basis of European identity the interaction between the numerous cultures and the transformations provoked by modernity, as well as the area of ideas (generated by modernity) and denies the opposition to the Other, as well as the geographic and cultural origin of the European identity. He emphasizes on values and principles, such as social justice and solidarity Delanty²⁹. In a more recent work, he again reaffirms the claim for a lack of main cultural or geographical origin of the European identity, as well as of an external Other, in relation to which this identity can be formed Delanty³⁰.

In conclusion we can say that defining the European identity is difficult because of the different meaning implied in this concept by the various social groups. On the basis of the theories discussed above, for the purposes of our research we are going to adopt the definition of Bruter³¹ for a European identity including a cultural

and a civil component, as it has been used in his empirical study of the European identity in several EU Member States and has proven its reliability and efficiency. So, in our research we are going to view the European identity as a political identity containing in it a cultural and a civil component necessary for the legitimacy of the European Union. It is related to the personal perception of the individual in terms of the surrounding environment and the various groups they identify themselves with, which implies distinguishing from the other groups. Also, we are going to analyze the components of the European identity through the prism of the European values (cultural and language diversity, in particular).

2.3. *Studies in the area of European identity*

There are many studies aiming at ascertaining availability or lack of European identity among the EU citizens, the most regular of them being *Eurobarometer*, which is conducted at a European level and where are included questions about the identification with the EU, the national state and the region. In the academic fields we can outline the studies of Bruter³², McLaren³³, Mitchell³⁴, etc., which study the European identity and the EU support in some EU members. Recently, there is a trend for studying the factors influencing the perception of Europe and the identification with Europe and the EU³⁵. Indicative is also the *European Values Study*, in the Fifth Wave of which Bulgaria also takes part, according to which in Europe there is a sharp interest to the European values³⁶.

For the purposes of this research we are going to concentrate on the studies analysing the impact of student mobilities on constructing European identity. *Erasmus+* Impact Studies are conducted by the European Commission, the last one being European Commission (2019). As we have mentioned above, we are going to analyse our results through the prism of Bruter's two-component model of European identity, as this is going to give us the opportunity to study more thoroughly the indicators related to the respondents' sense of belonging to Europe and the EU.

3. Methodology

This research uses both qualitative and quantitative methods*. First, there has been conducted an online questionnaire among students from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" having participated in *Erasmus+* mobilities in the period 2015–2019. The questionnaire contains 26 questions divided into four sub-groups representing conceptual indicators: *foreign language competences*; *attitudes towards EU and Europe*; *Erasmus+ experience* and *attitudes towards multilingualism*, plus *additional questions* on the students' university and mobility information. For the purposes of this study we are going to use only two of the conceptual indicators: *attitudes towards EU and Europe* and *Erasmus+ experience* (concerning their im-

* The authors would like to extend their special gratitude to Assoc. Prof. Kaloyan Haralampiev, PhD, from the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" for his most valuable contribution with the design of the online questionnaire and with the processing and analysing the quantitative data in this research.

pressions in the host country that can lead to a change in their attitudes towards Europe and the EU).

The study of the attitudes is based on the theory that the attitudes consist of three basic components – cognition, affect and action/behaviour³⁷. That is why there are questions related to the knowledge on the EU, the feelings related to the EU (feeling of belonging, feelings if the EU flag is being burnt) and readiness for action (proneness to study a European language). The answers to these questions will also show us the manifested European identity of the participants. Also, we would like to examine the declared vs. manifested identity of the respondents, as we believe there might be differences. For the quantitative analysis there have been used a frequency analysis and a multifactor analysis*.

Then, there have been conducted quality semi-structured interviews with students from almost all faculties of Sofia University (with the exception of Faculty of Pedagogy, Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts, Faculty of Slavic Philology and Faculty of Medicine, which does not participate in *Erasmus+* mobilities in general). We believe this method can show us the individual experience and the individual perspectives of the participants and can explain some of the links between the indicators in the questionnaire. for the analysis of the respondents' answers is used interpretation.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative research

The quantitative research conducted as a part of the present study has been carried out among students from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” who took part in *Erasmus+* mobilities while in their Bachelor or Master's programme. Most of the *Erasmus+* students participated in the programme while in their third or fourth year of their Bachelor's programme. 71.6% of the respondents are male and 28.4% are female, aged between 21 and 32. They took part in the *Erasmus+* mobility programme between 2015 and 2019.

The students belong to the following faculties – Faculty of History, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts, Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics, Faculty of Geology and Geography, Faculty of Philosophy, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Faculty of Physics and Faculty of Biology, Faculty of Chemistry and Pharmacy. There are no students from the Faculty of Medicine as they do not take part in *Erasmus+* programme. From all the participants contacted during the research (around 1000), 173 responded to the questionnaire.

The questions analyzed in the present research are related to the respondents' attitudes towards Europe and EU and they are divided into three sub-groups – the

* Multifactor analysis is chosen because it can show the hidden factors among quantitative indicators (Харалампиев, К. *IBM SPSS. Статистически решения на приложни изследователски задачи*. София: ИК „Балон“, 2012).

concept of the European, declared European identity, manifested European identity and the influence of the mobility.

4.1.1. The concept of “the European“

The first group of questions regarding European identity asks the respondents about their idea of “the European“. 76,7% of the respondents identify the concept of “the European“ as common rights, for 60,5% the “European“ is common values, for 45,9% – common cultural and historic heritage. For 35,5% of the respondents “the European“ is a political project, 7,0% have given other responses such as common views, common obligations and responsibilities, better opportunities, etc. 3,5% find it difficult to describe their idea of the “European“ and 1,2% have responded with “Nothing“ to the question. The students could give more than one answer to this question which explains the obtained results.

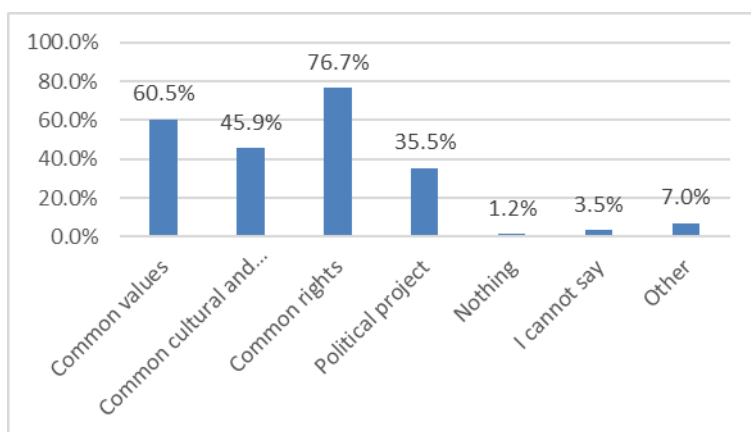


Fig 1. What does “the European“ mean for you?

The respondents also share their idea of European values and identify the most important European values. For 77,8% of the respondents the most important European value is freedom. 77,8% identify the respect for human rights as such value. 66,1% regard cultural diversity as the most important European value, 64,9% – democracy, 64,3% – equality, 62,0% – respect for human dignity, 43,9% – rules of law and 9,4% have given other responses (language diversity, Christianity, etc.).

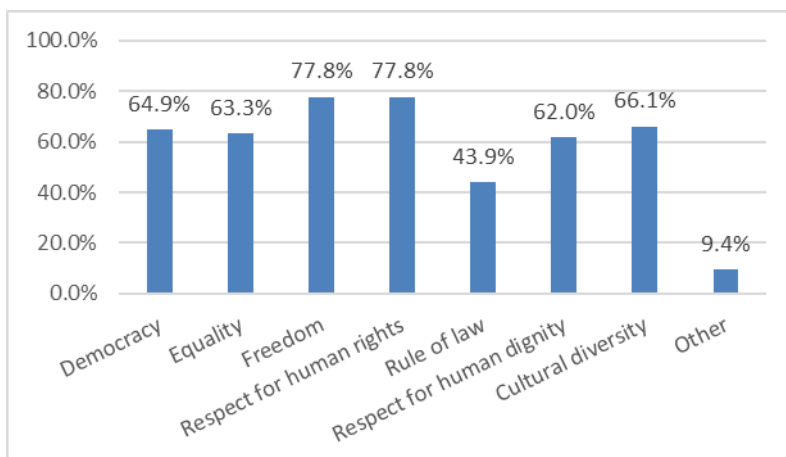


Fig 2. Which are the most important European values?

4.1.2. European identity

The other group of questions tried to explore the students' idea of what European identity is and identify the factors that influence it during the *Erasmus+* mobility programme.

4.1.2.1. Declared European identity

The next part of the research aims to find out how the respondents declare their attachment to Europe. The respondents first share their attachment to a certain town or region. About 80% of the respondents express attachment to their home town or region (55,6% of the respondents replied with "Yes, to a great extent" and 26.9% – with "Mostly yes"). 8,9% – with "Neither yes, nor no", 5,3% have chosen as their answer "Mostly no", 1,8% – with "No, not at all". 1,8% declared they cannot answer the question.

The majority of the students have expressed an attachment to Bulgaria. 66,3% have selected the option "Yes, to a great extent" and 23,3% have responded with "Mostly yes". 8,1% have opted for "Neither yes, nor no". A rather small percent of the respondents do not have any feeling of attachment to their home country and have responded to the question with the options "Mostly no" – 0,6% and "No, not at all" – 1,2%. Only 0,6% of the respondents are unsure how to respond to the question.

The next indicator refers to the attachment to Europe as identified by the respondents. 46,8% of the respondents have expressed a feeling of belonging to Europe and have marked "Yes, to a great extent" as their reply. 31,6% have responded with "Mostly yes". About 70% of the respondents affiliate themselves with Europe – a smaller share of respondents than those that affiliate themselves with Bulgaria. 15,2% have opted for "Neither yes, nor no". Only 5,3% of the students have responded with "Mostly no" and 1,2% are not sure how to respond to the question.

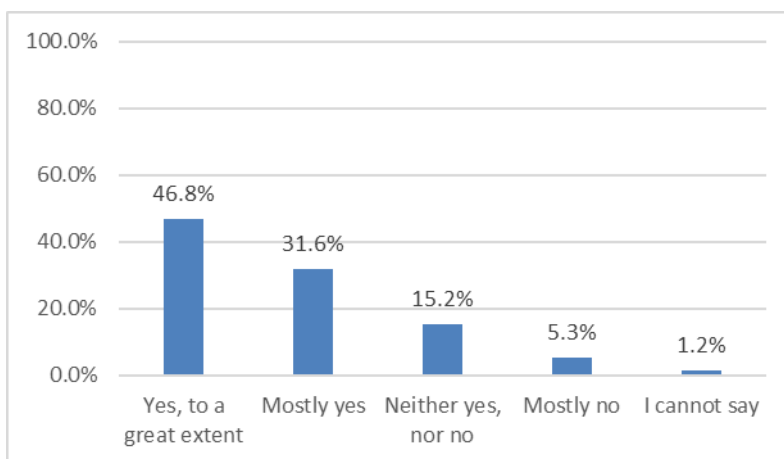


Fig 3. *Attachment to Europe*

The majority of respondents declare they feel closer to the people in Europe than to the people in America, Asia or Australia. 46,8% have responded with “Yes, to a great extent“, 42,1% – with “Mostly yes“. 17% have opted for “Neither yes, nor no“. Only 4.7% of the students have responded with “Mostly no“ and 1,2% – with “No, not at all“. 1,2% of the respondents are unsure how to respond to the question.

The majority of the respondents have answered positively to the three indicators – European, national and regional identity. These results show that the three identities are not in conflict with one another and can coexist.

4.1.2.2. Manifested European identity

The group of questions included in this part of the research aims to find out how the European identity is manifested among the respondents by exploring the following indicators – the respondents knowledge about Europe, their feelings towards European symbols and their behaviour towards Europe (in relation to their proneness to study a new European language).

As part of the questionnaire, the students are asked to share which symbols they consider European. As possible answers to the question are given both correct and incorrect options. 75,1% of the respondents correctly identify “Ode of Joy“ as a European symbol. 71,0% – the euro. 66,3% correctly identify the concept of “Unity in Diversity“ as a symbol of the “European“. 14,2% of the respondents wrongly identify the national passport as such symbol and 24,3% – 11th May. Most of the respondents (around 70%) are able to identify the European symbols correctly which leads to the conclusion that the respondents have knowledge about the European characteristics.

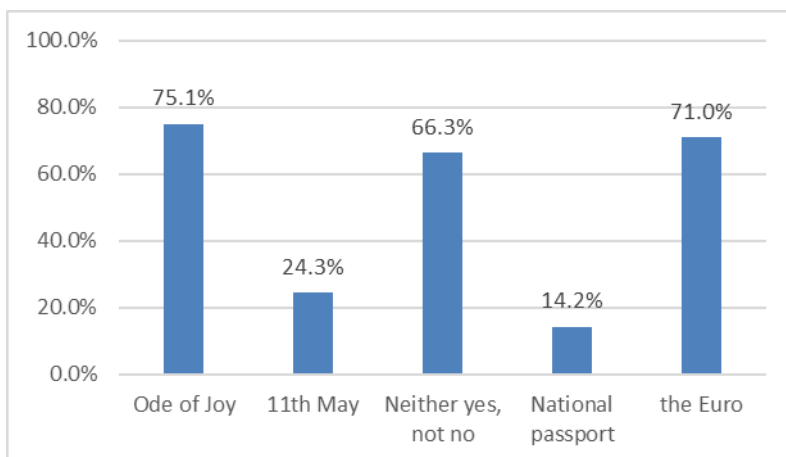


Fig 4. Which symbols are European?

The reaction towards the European symbols is indicative for the respondents' attachment to Europe. The questionnaire includes a question about the respondents' reaction to burning one of the symbols of Europe – the European flag. That question aims to study the respondents' feelings towards Europe as part of their manifested European identity. It was an open question, so in order to analyze the reactions it was necessary to encode them following a certain indicator – the type of the reaction. The respondents' reactions were then divided into 4 categories:

1. A negative reaction manifesting strong emotions – disgust, anger, horror, hurt, rage, sadness, disappointment, bad, unpleasant, fear, etc.;
2. A reaction without manifestation of emotions – surprise, confusion, disagreement, disrespect, etc;
3. A lack of reaction – indifference (“Nothing“, “I don’t know“);
4. Positive reactions – pride.

141 of the respondents have answered that question. The majority of them (about 67%) have declared they would have a negative reaction (disgust, anger, horror, etc.) if they see the European flag burning. About 18% would have a reaction but would not show any emotions (surprise, confusion, disagreement, etc.) and about 14% would have no reaction. Only one respondent (0.07%) has declared a positive reaction (pride) to the burning of a European symbol. These results show an emotional attachment to the European symbol which leads to the conclusion that the respondents identify themselves with the European community.

An indicator about the reactions towards burning the Bulgarian flag was also introduced. The data reveals that a big percent of the respondents would have a negative reaction (about 88%). A smaller percent will react to the burning but will not express any emotions (surprise, confusion, disagreement) – about 7%. About 5% of the respondents will not react to the burning at all. There were no positive reactions. These results reveal a strong emotional attachment to national symbols. However,

this emotional attachment to Bulgaria is not an impediment to forming an emotional attachment to Europe as well.

Another question part of the questionnaire aims to explore the respondents' proneness to study new foreign languages in order to find out what is the respondents' action they are going to undertake in terms of European language diversity (an expression of the European cultural identity). About 92.5% of the students have expressed a desire to study a new foreign language and some of them want to improve their current linguistic skills in already studied languages (French, German, Polish, Italian, Greek and Spanish). The responses can be summarized in the following way – interest towards Romance languages (Italian, Spanish, French and Portuguese), Germanic languages (German, Dutch, Islandic, Swedish and other Scandinavian languages), exotic languages (Arabic, Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese and Hungarian) and Balkan languages (Greek, Turkish, Romanian, Serbian). The data reveals that the majority of respondents (about 85%) want to study and improve European language which can be seen as an indicator for the respondents' interest in the corresponding European culture.

4.1.3. Impact of the mobility programme on European identity

4.1.3.1. Declared identity after the mobility

The other group of questions in the questionnaire explores the impact that the *Erasmus+* programme has on the European identity of the respondents. The majority of the respondents (more than 60%) declare they feel more European after the programme – 30,2% replied with “Yes, to a great extent“ and 33,1% – with “Mostly yes“. 22,1% have selected “Neither yes, nor no“ as their reply. A smaller percent replied negatively – 4,1% with “Mostly no“ and 4,1% with “No, not at all“. 6,4% of the respondents are not sure how to respond.

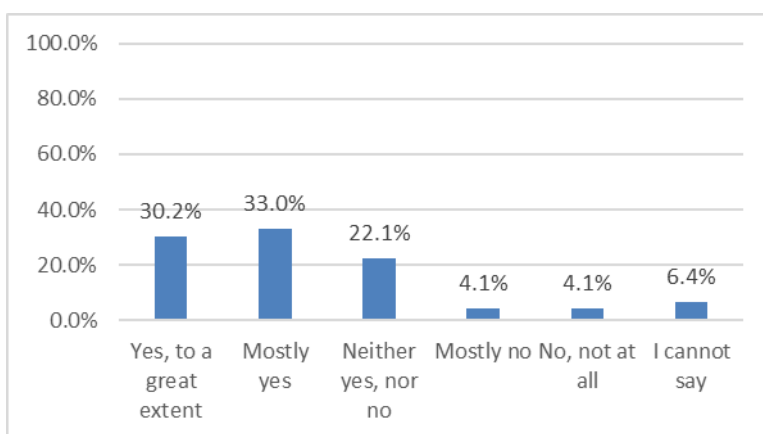


Fig 5. *Do you feel more European after the mobility?*

4.1.3.2. EU topics during the mobility programme

75,0% of the students have discussed topics connected with Europe and the European Union during their mobility, which leads to the conclusion that talks about Europe and the European Union are part of the mobility programme and can influence positively the European identity of the participants.

4.2.3. Other factors

The study also explores other factors that influence European identity. The respondents have been asked whether they have relatives or friends abroad (not connected with the mobility programme) and whether they have friendly relations with people from the receiving country after the end of the mobility programme. The following chart describes through a multifactor analysis the relations between these three indicators – relatives abroad, friends from the mobility and relatives living abroad.

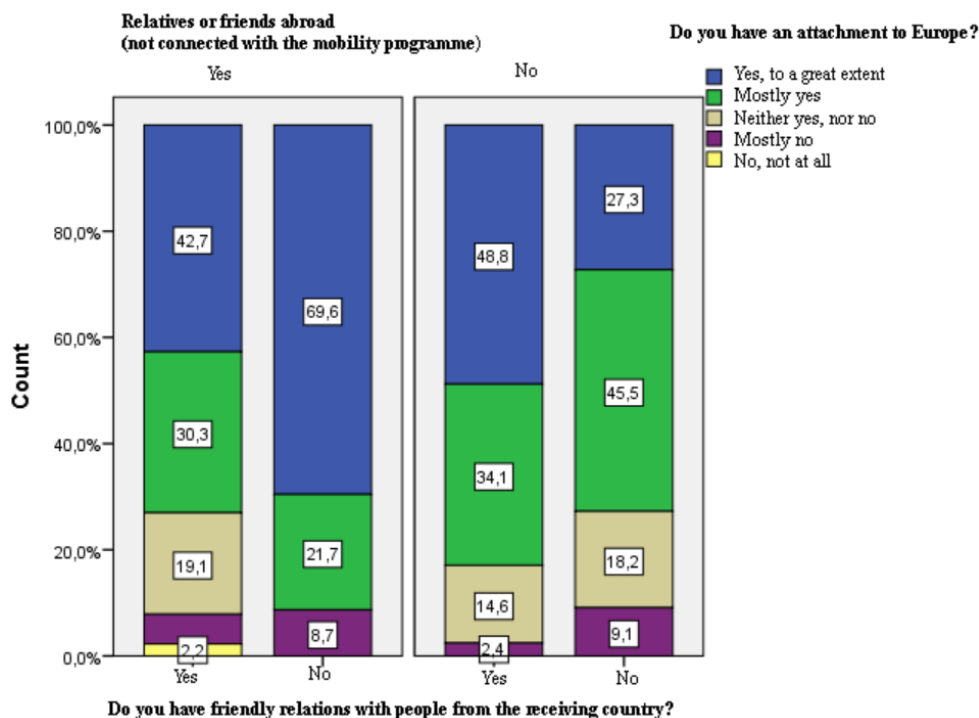


Chart 1. Other factors influencing European identity

The data shows that the biggest share (about 91%) of respondents that declare an attachment to Europe is among those that have visited relatives abroad but do not have friendly relations with people from the receiving country after the end of the mobility programme (69,6% replied with “Yes, to a great extent“ and 21,7% – with “Mostly yes“). The second biggest share of respondents that declare an attachment to Europe (about 83%) is the share of respondents that haven’t visited relatives

abroad but have friendly relations with people from the receiving country after the end of the mobility programme (48,8% replied with “Yes, to a great extent“ and 34,1% – with “Mostly yes“). The chart shows that the respondents that communicate with people abroad, no matter whether they are their relatives or friends that they met during their mobility, declare an attachment to Europe.

The smallest percent of the respondents (27,3%) that have declared an attachment to Europe and have responded with “Mostly yes“ to that question among those respondents that neither have relatives abroad, nor friends from the receiving abroad. The results lead to the conclusion that contact and communication with people abroad, no matter whether they are relatives of the respondents or not, has a big impact on the feeling of attachment to Europe and European identity.

4.2. Qualitative research

Besides the quantitative research, the project includes qualitative methods as well (semi-structured interviews). In September 2020 there were conducted 18 interviews with students that studied at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski“ and took part in a mobility programme between 2015 and 2019. The respondents come from the following faculties – Faculty of History (3), Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology (2), Faculty of Law (1), Faculty of Geology and Geography (1), Faculty of Philosophy (1), Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication (1), Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (3), Faculty of Physics (1), Faculty of Chemistry and Pharmacy (2), Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics (1), Faculty of Biology (1) and Faculty of Theology (1).

The aim of this qualitative research was to provide us with additional information on the factors affecting the feeling of European identity among the participants. That is why it includes some further questions on the effect of the mobility on the participants’ lives.

The questions are divided into logical sub-groups/conceptual indicators, focused on *foreign language competences*; *proneness to study a new foreign language*; *attitudes towards EU and Europe*; *Erasmus+ experience*. For the purposes of this paper we are going to analyze *attitudes towards EU and Europe*; *proneness to study a new foreign language* and *Erasmus+ experience*.

The questions related to the attitudes towards EU and Europe include questions on the participants’ associations with Europe and the EU, the concept of “the European“ they have in their minds, the qualities they consider important for “a European“ and the idea of and attitude towards Europe and the EU they had before their participation on the *Erasmus+* mobility. We assume that the answers would show us: first, the image of and the attitude to Europe and the EU they have, second, the components of European identity valid/salient for the participants at the moment of the interview, and third, the mobility’s influence on the participants’ perception of European identity, plus the identification of some other factors on it.

In terms of *the first association with Europe* the participants gave various answers, but we can group them around several core ideas, namely “a group of more

developed countries“, “a large community“, “a community of people with different values and different cultures“, “a community concentrated on a certain continent“, “many cultures, different countries on one continent“, “free travelling“, “free travelling without borders“, “unity, people speaking one language“, “a variety of cultures, different people, different languages, history“, “home“. There was one negative association with Europe (“a good idea, but not well developed“, “a utopia“), but when asked to further elaborate, it turned out that this is the respondent’s association with the European Union, and the one with Europe is mainly related to culture. When asked about their *first association with the European Union*, it turned out that the majority of the respondents have the same association as with Europe and don’t make any difference. Still, when asked to further explain their associations with the EU, some of the participants gave answers related to common policies and institutions (“common laws, common policies, assistance, support“, “free travelling, free exchange of labour and knowledge“), even going further to a common state (“a single nation“, “an empire“). A few of the associations are related to the Western countries and to certain values they have (“order, welfare, values“). Also, there are two associations with the European symbols (the European flag and the European anthem “Ode to Joy“).

As to *the meaning ascribed to “the European“* by the respondents, for most of them it is related to unity (“something that unites all this diversity“, “some unity“, “common values“, “common history“), diversity, a feeling of community and freedom (“freedom of travelling“, “freedom and provided opportunities“, “freedom of speech“, “freedom of choice“), an ideal and an idea. There are some answers relating “the European“ with the Western countries and values (“striving towards tolerance and understanding of the others“). For a few interviewees the answers given to this question coincide with the answers related to their associations with Europe and the EU.

The qualities characteristic for the Europeans, expressed in the interviews, are various, but most often they are related to tolerance (“tolerance, open to the other people“, “tolerance, to respect people with other values and other viewpoints“, “tolerance, discipline, responsibility“, “very open to the people“), education and culture (“culture, to know a lot about culture“, “education and high etiquette“, “to speak several languages“, the European should speak English“) and more general qualities (“kindness“, “antisemitism“, “discipline and self-control“, “to know their rights“, “to observe the values of and to defend the interests of their own country and of the Union“).

There is included a question about *the respondents’ attitudes and image of Europe and the EU before their mobility*. Generally, they are related to the image of the EU as a community and have been constructed by the media and the news, as well as by other students who had been on an Erasmus mobility before. Most of the respondents share that they had the same image and attitude to the EU before the mobility as they have now. However, there was one answer stating that their attitude has become more pro-European since their mobility, and two answers showing more

Euro-skepticism after the mobility (“Then it [*the attitude to the EU*] was more positive and different”; “Before I was looking more naively at the things”). Some of the respondents state they haven’t had any specific expectations before the mobility and some of them can’t remember exactly.

In order to study the respondents’ attitudes towards Europe and the EU more thoroughly, it is necessary to look at their actions/behaviour in relation to Europe. We assume that their proneness to study a new language European language can manifest their European cultural identity. The results show that around a half of the interviewees want to study a new European language (Italian, Greek – because they like the culture or have linguistic interests, and Spanish – out of practical reasons). Also, there is an expressed interest in exotic languages, such as Arabic and Japanese. Many of the respondents prefer to consolidate their knowledge in languages they have already studied and a small percentage of them would not start studying a new language. Therefore, we may conclude that the respondents’ proneness to study a new European language is not that explicit and may not be a contributing factor for their overall attitudes to Europe/the EU.

In order to study *the mobility’s influence on the participants’ perception of European identity*, we have to discuss their *Erasmus+* experience. For this purpose, there were questions on the respondents’ motivation, their most striking impression from the mobility; their communication in the host country; their feelings after the mobility; the change they experienced after the mobility and the advice they give to the future participants.

Generally, most of the respondents’ motivation to participate in the mobility was related to their wish to travel and “to see the wide world“, to get to know the foreign culture and language and the foreign educational system, and also to have professional development and to see check whether a future moving to another country is possible. The results show the predominant cultural elements in the respondents’ motivation, which is most probably related to developing the cultural component of the European identity.

As to the respondents’ most striking impressions from the mobility – most often they mentioned the high level of the host university (the lecturers, the facilities, the environment) and then the attitude of the local people (cold and unfriendly in France and Netherlands and very warm in Turkey; strong individualism and lack of cooperative spirit). The communication was mainly with the foreign students and mostly in English. Sometimes other languages were used (French, German, Italian, Turkish, Polish, Croatian). Although some of the interviewees shared they have had both positive and negative impressions, for the rest of them the mobility has been a positive experience.

In terms of the way the participants were feeling during the mobility, a few respondents share they had stress in the beginning due to the new environment and to some difficulties they had with university bureaucracy, boarding and language (in France). Nevertheless, most of the respondents felt very well, very enthusiastic, curious and even “at home“ and saw the new environment as “quiet“, “great“ and

“interesting“. One of the respondents shared that after the mobility there we mixed feelings – both sorrow that it is over and joy that it has happened.

The great majority of the respondents shared that they experienced a great change in their life (sometimes even in various aspects). On the one hand, they had an improvement in many areas – knowledge, language skills, communication, confidence, and on the other hand – they realized they are part of one community. They advise the future participants to be bolder and more active and to use their opportunities to fullest.

5. Conclusion

From the results of the quantitative analysis we can conclude that the most frequent **concept of/association with “the European“** is common rights and common values, with the most important European values being freedom and respect for human rights (which indicates a prevalence of the civil component). In terms of **European identity**, 78,4% declare they feel attachment to Europe and the EU, which is not in conflict with their declared attachment to Bulgaria and their region/town – 89,6% and 82,5% respectively. As to **the manifested European identity**, again we have a majority of respondents (between 70% and 80% in general) having knowledge about EU, showing emotions about a European symbol and readiness for action in relation to one of the most distinct European value (European linguistic diversity). We can conclude that **the mobility’s influence on the participant’s European identity** is positive, as the majority of the respondents (63,3%) declare they feel more European after the mobility. Except for the *Erasmus+* experience itself, there was an assumption that discussing EU-related topics would be a contributing factor for the European identity of the participants. Some **other factors** are also outlined – visiting relatives and friends in Europe (not connected to the mobility). The results of the multifactor analysis show that there is an impact of the contact and communication with people in Europe on the European identity, no matter whether they are relatives of the respondents or not.

The results of the qualitative interviews analysis confirms the findings of the quantitative study showing explicitly that the *Erasmus+* mobility has been a life-changing experience for the respondents helping them to achieve better communicative, foreign language and academic skills and giving them a sense of belonging to a community. The interviews give us more details about the respondents’ perception of “the European“ and the qualities the Europeans should have. In their answers there is a predominance of the cultural elements of the European identity.

The results of both quantitative and qualitative research methods show a positive impact of the *Erasmus+* students’ mobilities on the development of European identity among the participants from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski“. Still, it would be helpful some further research to be conducted to identify more factors influencing the students’ attachment to Europe and the EU.

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