

## Europeanization through students' lens: EU versus EaP citizens. Is there a collective identity?

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### Abstract

*The process of Europeanization has been intensively discussed and participation in debates has been vigorously tested by the academic world, mostly concerned with examining political personalities. This process is often seen through a political and economic view, ignoring the spiritual part pointing to a collective identity rationale. Hereby, our interest consists of finding how this concept is perceived through students' lens. We aim at investigating students' opinions, revealing young citizens' points of view. The conducted research is qualitative, consisting of in-depth interviews, for discovering participants' standpoints and attitudes towards admitting European bonds and becoming Europeans not just as frame, but in a substantial way, from the perspective of belongingness to a European Union (EU) member state or to an Eastern Partnership (EaP) member state. As the findings show, the bond with the European Union is seen through a political and cultural approach. Students' understanding of the Europeanization process is varied, and so are their endeavours of spreading the importance to adhere to the European Union and to share the European spirit among students belonging to EaP states.*

**Keywords:** Europeanization, civil society, collective identity, public sphere, Romanians, Moldavians

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## 1. Introduction

The the European Union (EU) integration is just the first step towards membership, but the development of Europeans can be made through the completion of the Europeanization process. New media, so often used by young citizens, have the ability to engender social change. Online platforms for direct discussions and online meetings are perceived as representative spaces for liberty in communication and for gaining friendships and partnerships. The feeling of friendship and the plurality of interests, that share a common subject until an end, are incentives for developing an action of association in the online area.

With this purpose in view, we focused on examining if people acknowledge their collective identity and if they sustain further implementation of European laws in the member states and continuing cooperation with future member states. It should be stressed out that the European Union is not only a political and economic system, but it has a social layer, which is often ignored by politicians. European policies are applied to citizens and not to institutions. The institutions have obligations in sustaining European legislation, but assuming Europeanization is a people-driven process.

Collective activities are a starting point for collective identity and citizens can shape common interests, cultural symbols, and systematic goals. Solidarity and commitment are directly connected to collective identity (Hunt and Benford, 2004) and, from this perspective, the power of civil society and the propensity for human interactions are determinant in proclaiming a collective identity in the European space.

The present paper intends to investigate the modality in which the process of Europeanization is perceived by young citizens and what the impact of collective identity is for the cementation of the European spirit. Without casting any doubt upon the importance of the political and economic aspects of the European Union, we intend to demonstrate that the intensification of online and even offline social circles of debates is responsible for communicating and promoting the European spirit. People are psychologically bond by communities when they feel fulfilled, with democratic power and with sharing common fate and common visions. The explanation of collective identity is an opportunity for non-European peoples to reinterpret views concerning the role of the European institutions in citizens' lives, especially when they are integrated as components of the Eastern Partnership.

Building on this logic, the paper brings a contribution to the societal implications of adhering to the European Union and is structured as follows: firstly, the theoretical section approaches two main research directions, the process of Europeanization and the online public sphere as an incentive of collective identity; secondly, the methodological section describes the research design (participants, procedure, measures); thirdly, the empirical section brings to

the forefront of European discussions the results derived from fourteen in-depth interviews which were conducted with young citizens interested in debating Europe. The paper presents a parallel between perceptions of interviewees from a EU member state versus the ones from a EaP member state.

Through the analysis, we aim to improve the empirical findings concerning Europeanization, the encouraging actions of newcomers and the societal aspects of new admissions. We premise that young citizens are more likely to accept social change, to align with the European spirit and to identify the feeling of the European Community in prospective newcomers.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. The process of Europeanization – an imperative for a powerful union**

Europeanization may be understood as export of models and institutional adaptation, where the process of adaptation concerns two aspects: learning by doing and selection after competing (Olsen, 2002, p. 925). The experiences lived by the European actors are mainly important in determining to determine their interpretation, their perception and assumed consequences and in establishing to establish the extent to which to what point they were able to accept and apply European law. The implementation of the European laws is a member state's obligation and is achieved realized through national administration and justice (Bărbulescu, 2015, p. 130).

Institutionalization means vertical pressure for adaptation and the procedure has a double –step rhythm: resource distribution and persons in an opportunity structure. Veto actors, through learning and socialization environments, turn to institutionalize norms and finally, elicit domestic changes (Radaelli, 2004). European policy-making exhibits three ways: the assessment of European Union's measures in member states; changing structures; and changing beliefs and expectations (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 2002, p. 257). An institutional European model affects existent structures, and finally, affects the beliefs of national actors, having cognitive avails on them.

These demarcations between political environment and societal implications mark trust and distrust among citizens. European members illustrate a deficit in identifying as Europeans, even if some persons admit that, as European citizens, their standard of living is higher and they feel more resourceful and self-confident (Marody, 2003, Vătămănescu et al., 2015).

Lately, the European Union manifested the intention to enlarge its borders and attract more countries in order to strengthen the political and economic grounds. The pursuit of the Eastern Partnership is to stimulate reforms in Eastern European countries - such as the Republic of Moldova - and to establish strong links with the European Union with a view to cement the rule of law, democracy

and to bring the Eastern European states finally together (Kirova and Freizer, 2015). The European Union is considered the main engine for the ongoing partnership (Martinezgarnelo Y Calvo, 2014), but, without denying the accomplished projects such as the energy platform, it is worth considering the importance of developing a sense of collective belonging from the societal and legal standpoints, even if treated as a partner and not as a member state.

The administrative structures of the EU member states have to ensure the compatibility of their legal system with the EU law, which turns out to be a real challenge. Harmonizing national legislation with EU law is a must in the implementation of the EU spirit of law. This is a test of the national parliaments to enlarge the capacity of law-making (Papadimitriou, 2002). The Eastern Partnership states have been struggling to create a stable environment for business development, to bring the legal area to a non-corruptive frame, adapted to real principles of democracy and human rights (Kirova and Freizer, 2015).

Europeanization is built upon changing opportunity structures (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 2002, p. 259) and creates equilibrium by involving the strategic positions of actors. European policies challenge existent rules and transform them and, at the same time, transform the opportunities that are open to citizens. However, European policies are not as strong as for totally changing the master of a certain domain because the dominant position of different players cannot be sufficiently changed. It might be the case of a country which has a compatible ground with the European policies, but in certain areas where some changes have already been performed in legislation and in procedure, the new European policy cannot totally converge with the reform already made. In this case, to some extent, it will be a deviation from the regulatory (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 2002).

Internal institutions have different degrees in becoming convergent with European Union's law and policies (Cirtautas and Schimmelfennig, 2010; Jacoby, 2000; Radaelli, 2004). Convergence is not a compulsory condition for change, but it is a condition for quick implementation of the European Union's law; it is not always a consequence of the above pressures, mainly for domestic political system (Radaelli, 2004). The European policies have different effects according to the state in which they are implemented. The impact is different in member states. If the opposing coalitions are strong enough to defy the European Union's objectives, this framing mechanism will not be sufficient for the practicability of the reforms. A better understanding of another state can be succeeded by every country from the perspective of its counter-part.

The process of adopting the EU *acquis* cannot be a short-term process because of the needed improvements, consultancy and evaluation. The countries are determined to restructure their administrative background and the European Union maintains its diversity in importing Europeanization in each member state. In fact, the new comers in the European Union do not influence the content of the

concept Europeanization; they are seen just as consumers, not producers of content (Papadimitriou, 2002, p. 12).

On the contrary, Schifirneț (2011) considers that the process of Europeanization is continuously changing its frames every time when a state becomes a new member of the Union. Every entrant modifies the political structure of the Union and, at the same time, the cultural and principled area. There is a dual identity of a European state: first, every member state has kept its own traditions and elements of national autonomy, as well as interests in strengthening common institutions and secondly, a European construction where common pursuits are foreground (Morgan, 2000).

The European Union provides the necessary consultancy for the implementation of the EU law, but, *de facto*, the rules of the administrative national power have to be applied so as to continue the process of Europeanization. The European Commission tries to carry forth some approaches for a better compliance with the European Union *acquis* and the national governments are free to choose the best model that fits their country needs (Papadimitriou, 2002).

The European society is built on the exploitation of the opportunities for satisfying Europeans' needs (Schifirneț, 2011, p. 94). In his paper, Schifirneț (2011) confirmed the hypothesis that the Europeanization of the Romanian society is conditioned by the congruence of the European policies with citizens' requirements. For instance, in Romania, this direction is encountered in case of higher education, where the quality of educational services changes in the light of internationalization and of a stronger integration into the European Union (Nicolescu and Dima, 2010; Nicolescu, 2014) bringing about higher accordance with European policies on the one hand but also with the citizens' exigence on the other hand. The European mechanism of framing, through inducing ideas and beliefs, configures the belief system and then obtaining cooperation and new reforms as an opportunity of changing, in accordance with the European policies (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 2002).

While not denying the importance to wholly apply the European directives, the policies induced by the EU are more likely to be accepted and practiced earlier if they take into account the economic, social and political particularities of each European country (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 2002, p. 277).

Bringing European change to the forefront of the discussion, five areas are converting through the Europeanization process: the external boundaries; formal-legal institutions; national governance; forms of political organization and a project for political unification (Olsen, 2002, p. 923). According to Olsen (2002), the European Union can become a stronger entity if the European system of governance develops in the extra-communitarian area and in the inside boundaries of each member state. Levitz and Pop-Eleches (as cited in Cirtautas and Schimmelfennig, 2010, p. 437) asserted that in member states, such as Bulgaria

and Romania, it is not totally true that the right external incentives have the capacity to surpass all types of internal political or economic legacies. Communist legacies justify the concepts of commonality and continuity, but domestic conditions might be positively incorporated into the sequential scanning of Europeanization (Cirtautas and Schimmelfennig, 2010, p. 439).

Cultural diversification resulted from the acceptance of newcomers in the European Union forms an issue for the process of Europeanization. International inflows in Europe augments the process of Europeanization, for it contributes to establish differences between Europeans and non-Europeans (Romaniszyn, 2003, p. 114).

Even from 1997, Europeanization has been pragmatically perceived as a new vision, spirit and process (Borneman and Fowler, 1997, p. 510). Europeanization is both vertical and horizontal. Three processes govern the EU policy formulation: bargaining, hierarchy and facilitated coordination (Radaelli, 2004, p. 12). Negotiation is seen sometimes as an act of compliance, but bargaining is very often used when applying EU law in national spaces of member states. Alternatively, socialization can be transposed in the act of bargaining. Radaelli (2004) asserted that hierarchy implied a vertical mechanism, positive or negative concerning the existence of European models and that every government had the capacity of engaging in the EU regulatory documents. The third process - facilitated coordination signifies European cooperation and produces learning opportunities, but no legislation is prorogued (Radaelli, 2004, p. 13).

## **2.2. The online public sphere and the rise of collective identity**

Recent studies have shown that the most active area of debates and free discussions is represented by new media, with the help of technology development (Castells, 2009; Harris and Rea, 2009; Loader and Mercea, 2012; Unwin, 2012). The network society modifies the term “sociability”. Internet users extend their area of acquaintances and try to combine forms of communication which are determined by their own needs of dialogue (Vătămănescu et al., 2016), manifesting with the others consensus-oriented discussion or dissension. The online communication system is interactive, diversified and flexible (Castells, 2005).

Most of the times, the education level makes the difference between the access to Internet and its use. The cultural environment is a precondition for the use of new technologies, technical skills are learnt through educational programs and the user’s receptivity depends on the interest in using the Internet (Cardoso, 2005, p. 46), on security settings (Cole, 2005) and, needless to say, on transparency in communication (Tomšič and Rek, 2008).

The Internet is a proper place for generating social capital, which leads to the formation of online civil society. It creates a communication area, where

people gather to express opinions and to be united in certain goals and interests, becoming a place for engendering social capital (Carothers, 1999). Cognitive skills are considered a higher level of the individual's state. Whether these skills are a legacy or are developed through time, the balance tends to be in favour of social cohesion and not social diffusion (Cardoso, 2005).

Good practices are discussed to improve the quality of regulation at the internal level and European Union's level. The method of coordination has given space to discourses and socialization; it has created a community of debate, but with no improvement in social inclusion (Radaelli, 2004, p. 13). Democratic institutions show legitimizing opposition and develop a community where collective responsibility offers qualitative public services and cultivates equal chances for European citizens (Olsen, 2002; Szabo, 1991).

The European Union's governance is aware of the need to foster a new way of thinking, a more profound one, which is, at the same time, responsible for a regulatory behaviour. One important implication in educational programs is students' involvement in institutions in a manner which gains their interest in the decision-making process and in the implementation process (van Dijk, 2012; Olsen, 2002). The absence of civil society, the nature of the social model and European identity are parts that describe the internal problems of Europeanization and its receptivity in the eyes of European citizens. The same problem is observed in EaP states, where the civil society is not involved in promoting European ideas and, as Kirova and Freizer (2015) asserted, EU policies and opportunities should be explained in a more detailed manner to citizens in order to bring the integration and constant adaptation through new laws and reforms closer.

A European public sphere signifies an area of transnational communication of European countries. This public sphere can be characterized as being weak or strong, considering the number and frequency of public participation, where people are interested in showing their own perspectives on actual policies, applied in each of their nation-states and on potential projects or ideas that can be transformed in law purveyors in the future. While mass media offers a limited democracy in European problems because media channels insist on national problems, the new media (online platforms, forums, informal or formal websites) offer a space of free discussions between free European citizens, the only limitation being the time dedicated for online discussions.

Some governments are hostile to civil society and do not want to be transparent because they fear opposite opinions and they do not have the strength to combat those opinions or they are corrupt (Mendelson, 2015). Cooperation springs from the manifestation of the desire for discussing, giving arguments, counter-arguments, evaluating opinions and deciding towards a better future of the organization.

The incorporation of civil society depends on the system of values and the political views: the first sees civil society as a remedy for the legitimacy crisis,

developing horizontal lines of communication and cooperation is a solution to common problems (Kohler-Koch, 2009). European institutions look for organizations capable to present the EU agenda and to gather information that can transform the policy-making in a more coherent one. The public sphere can be settled apart from the state or economic market through sifting information according to personal principles and efficiency in sharing different approaches, and is representative for the democratic legitimacy of the European governance (Nanz, 2007, p. 11).

There are opposed diagnoses, given by different observers, concerning civil society support. Civil society does not have as aim just to be a critic of the government, but also a constructive piece. Civil society must be driven as a partner of governance and not as a competitor and, for this to happen, it is requisite to establish a correspondence between the principle of transparency and governance's actions (Bănulescu-Bogdan, 2011) and the main function of civil society organizations is linking people to the state and assessing relations with the authorities (Youngs, 2015), improving the decision-making process (Shahin, Woodward and Terzis et al., 2013).

A European civil society cannot exist without a common identity and without a common language. For internet users, the *lingua franca* is English, but participation is limited, indeed, from this perspective, to some categories of citizens; usually, highly educated people detain more communication and technological skills (Beckert, Lindner, Goos, Hennen et al., Aichholzer and Strauß, 2011).

Collective identity is the connection established by a person with an institution or community, from a cognitive and emotional perspective (Hunt and Benford, 2004; Polletta and Jasper, 2001, p. 285). This concept reveals positive feelings towards being a member of a social circle or of a society. Usually, social ties are responsible for the identification of an individual to a certain group or community.

Schifirneț (2014) defines the social group as an assembly of individuals who share a feeling of unity and who are permanently involved in processes of interaction. The definition of the social group can be extended to a political union that has become a societal union as an aim, as well. Rules of reciprocity are pillars for mutual action and the key to engage collective identity is to foster solidarity between the members of the group and then to set common demands (Adler, 2012). Eder (2008) ascertained that collective identity results mainly from narrative bonds and not from argumentative, normative images, the debates being claimed as the most important piece for spreading European ideas and identification.

Participation is sustained by collective identities (Polletta and Jasper, 2001) and people's representation in political area can be an incentive for the process of identification with another group. The solidification of collective identity is a



mark for citizens' commitment and for differentiating "us" from the "others". Hunt and Benford (2004) asserted that the clarification of boundaries for every individual is a modality to create a sense of collective identity and to develop internal commitment. In terms outlined by Flesher Fominaya (2010), collective identity means interaction, linking people with common interests, and emotional ties. The same author sustained that collective identity can be also based on diversity and inclusivity and that potential membership might be gained through social-emotional factors. The democracy in the European Union has as start the consciousness of being a member of the same community and of leaving behind egoistic measures and interests (Eder, 2008).

The European Union, as an alliance of countries, is constructively linked to a self-conscious strategy for developing collective identity. Political identities are sustained by legal bonds and envision into a control of European boundaries (Eder, 2008). Melucci (1995) insisted that the easiest way to assess individuals' membership is to be aware of opportunities and to consolidate personal position to the rest of a community. European identity is a narrative network of social relations whereas the modern construction of social relations expands to groups which support collective identity and more precisely transform into nations (Eder, 2008). The identity edifice involves four layers: awareness, activities, commitment, and trial (Hunt and Benford, 2004, p. 445).

Collective identity involves psychological needs of individuals such as the feeling of belonging, which is accomplished by being part of a network (Eder, 2008). Promoting assimilation (Brewer and Gardner, 1996) is a manner for enhancing social development, and, at the same time, for accomplishing individual needs. The combination of differences in assimilating collective aspects of the self, remains, *per se*, an active and balanced formation of collective identity. A shared fate is the basis of interdependence, which is, along with affective commitment and social embeddedness, an element of collective identity (Ashmore et al., 2004). Collective identity is a new dimension of the social capital which cannot be understood in terms of linearity anymore. A new perspective of nonlinearity should be used in achieving the integration of all emotional and spiritual phenomena (Bratianu, 2011, 2015).

Ashmore et al. (2004) consider social embeddedness as an important element for maintaining a collective identity whereas it refers to the fact that the relinquishment of the group or community makes the individual position himself in a hard undesirable situation. In the same perspective, individual's perception of being equal is a desire for every group. The chance given to the individual to choose from different social and psychological positions allows him to adopt a collective identity as a pattern for improving himself and for fulfilling common actions and knowledge (Bolisani et al., 2012; Bolisani and Oltramari, 2012). Cultural techniques serve as indirect social relations, presuming that network's structure can have variations, and the more distinctive individuals are, the more

the need for a collective identity is felt (Adler, 2012; Eder, 2008; Păduraru et al., 2016).

The European Union has various cultures and nation approaches rely on the cultural exchange so it can be claimed that a precondition for admitting European spirit is the openness to share the same cultural ground and to accept each other. In fact, at present, all European countries have a democratic base, which buttresses the idea of equal citizens and equal rights. According to Eder (2008), social connectivity affiliates to political dimension and to cultural explanations. Collective identity surpasses the stage of membership; it emphasizes social affinities and the bond between individuals (Ashmore et al., 2004).

Identification with Europe implies trust in its institutions and a certain degree of knowledge, cultural tracks and less political expectations or regulations (Eder, 2008), which expands the communication space about integration and Europeanization. When a person admits that he or she is part of a certain social category means self-definition is collective and not interpersonal or strictly personal (Brewer and Gardner, 1996, p. 90). Eder (2008, p. 8) describes Europe as a narrative process: a common market, social bond of diversity and a shared past, developing emotions about being Europeans. This economic and political Union has its chance to unite peoples from a social point of view. A member of a group has also relations with non-group members, which denotes a pro-social behaviour (Ashmore et al., 2004, p. 102), linking the whole group to the non-member.

Eder (2008) expressed caution in adopting collective identity. His opinion is that collective identity in Europe could be productive only if it adopts a dynamic form, which allows sequential reconstruction, on the contrary, it may produce incongruence between member states. Ashmore et al. (2004) buttressed self-categorization components of well-being and perceived certainty as different facets of identifying with a collectivity. Their work exhibits that individuals feel comfortable in a certain group or community if they perceive membership as being fruitful for social certitude and social congruence.

The evolution of the process of identification with the European Union relies on the existent social structures, where the plurality of collective identities will combine and transform in a unique collective identity (Eder, 2008).

### **3. Purpose and research questions**

The aim of this paper is to investigate the opinions of young citizens, with a single nationality (Romanian versus Moldavian), about the process of Europeanization and about their interest in becoming Europeanized and in sharing a collective identity. The basis of the approach relies on the distinction between citizens from EU member states versus citizens from EaP member states. The research questions that draw the line of our research are: 1) Is Europeanization

perceived as an emerging process or as a stagnant one?; 2) Are young EU citizens aware of their impact in the European public sphere through their attitudes?; 3) Is institutional exploitation a way of Europeanizing society?; 4) Are young citizens from EaP member states (i.e. Moldavian students) interested in sharing a collective identity?.

## **4. Materials and Methods**

### **4.1. Participants**

14 students, including 7 Romanians (EU citizens) and 7 Moldavians (EaP member state citizens), specialized in political sciences, law and public administration, who are also active users of online communication services (aged between 19 and 21), answered to an interview-based survey. The selection of the participants was made through a snowball sampling. Also, the interviewees were chosen taking into account their openness to talk about European topics, the desire of being part of a communication area and of sustaining European policies and European integration of other Eastern states. Students' standpoints were investigated because they form a category often ignored by researchers, and which, in fact, is considered to have a more optimistic stand for the European Union and European citizenship. At the same time, their answers reveal the theme of new admissions with more accuracy.

### **4.2. Procedure**

In order to generate detailed and in-depth descriptions of the participants' experiences, we chose to use phenomenological interviews. The interviewees' observations, perceptions and understandings were investigated by employing a semi-structured in-depth interview based on open-ended questions. We considered individual interviews more valuable to provide detailed information about the meaning of the situations and of the social contexts to each participant in the setting.

The interviews were conducted during March and April 2016 and consisted of 11 main questions. Questions were posed in an informal manner in order to give the sensation of a free conversation, with no restraints in expressing opinions. The respondents were explained the purpose of the interview. Still, they were not given too much detail that would have biased their responses. The intent of the qualitative research was to uncover profound meanings held by the participants in the setting. The respondents were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity in the aggregated findings. Questions focused on the importance to discuss European issues in social circles, to enjoy searching and reading European information. Concentrating of the main focus of this research, we were interested

in shedding light on the degree of acknowledging the implementation of European legislation and the bond which is established between Europeans and non-Europeans (members of the Eastern Partnership) towards Europeanizing and adhering to the EU.

The structure of the interview followed Seidman's (1998) three-phase qualitative interview: focused life history (the respondents' experiences were put in context, by asking them to provide as much information as possible about themselves, in relation to the topic of the study); the details of experience (concrete details of their present experience in the research topic area); reflection on the meaning (reflection on the meaning of their experience, how they make intellectual and emotional connections with the experiences that are the subject of the research topic). The answers to the interviews were categorized by carrying out a thematic analysis as a systematic way of identifying all the main concepts which arose in the interviews, and of developing them into common themes. A comparative approach was considered appropriate with a view to thoroughly analyze the data and to identify similarities and differences of opinions, as in other studies conducted with students in Romania (Nicolescu, 2011).

### 4.3. Measures

The analysis was focused on several key issues: 1) the understanding of the process of Europeanization, 2) respondents' interest in communicating Europe, 3) respondents' attitudes towards including new members in the European Union and 4) the implication of national institutions in respondents' lives as Europeans or as members of the Eastern Partnership.

## 5. Findings and discussion

Regardless of their citizenship (EU member state or EaP member state), most of our respondents (11 out of 14) see the European Union as a political structure with common objectives and whose content involves a permanent cooperation between the member states. *"I see the admission to the European Union as being a progress for us, a way to develop our country, our culture, our economy. At the same time, we can interact with other countries and promote our values and traditions"* (Vlad, 19 y.o., Romanian).

Two of the interviewees (Paula, 20 y.o., Maria, 21 y.o., Romanian) show another dimension of the process of Europeanization by alleging the change of beliefs, attitudes and concepts between member states. They show, through clear examples, that they are Europeans who can impress and change the states of mind of other Europeans, a possibility that is given thanks to the adherence to the EU in 2007. Similarly, Cristian (20 y.o., Romanian) speaks about *„a confederation which has the power to unite its citizens and to endure a common future and to*

*experience a cultural and communitarian exchange*". The European framework can be conceptualized as a family, as stressed by several Romanian students, with the only dissimilarity that one is not able to choose the members of his family. Magda (21 y.o., Romanian) deems that *"the expression more peoples means more diversity and more conflicts, but as a family, you have to accept divergent opinions and to solve conflicts in order to obtain mutual assistance and a common path"*. Contrary to the answers obtained from the young Europeans (Romanian students), the young citizens from EaP member states (Moldavian students) lost sight of the importance of being united and feeling secure in a political Union, asserting that they characterize the EU as a "confederation" with nation states who earn reciprocal benefits: *"I characterize the European Union as a super state, which establishes internal rules between nation states, providing assets for each other"*.

The majority of the respondents from the EU member state, Romania avouched their interest in searching European news mainly in the online environment, but they sustained that, usually, they do not discuss European topics with their acquaintances unless they are asked to or the main topic is related to European business. Antagonistically, all the respondents from the EaP member state, Republic of Moldova, asserted that they often talk about the European Union and the problem or future admissions and they search a lot for European news on social media and other websites. An expositive answer is the one of Nicolae (19 y.o., Moldavian): *"I spend much of my spare time discussing with friends and relatives about the European Union and its future. I hope we will be part of it. It is not just about adhering to an important structure and not being left aside, but at the same time, it is about admitting that alone we have no chance in obtaining a real democratic structure. I like very much searching online other persons' suggestions for becoming part of this Union"*.

When being asked about the assumption of European citizenship, almost all respondents from the EU member state posited they feel European because they have equal rights and obligations as other Europeans, but the feeling of being European as a dual identity (nation and supra-nation) was left aside by the majority. They all insisted on political contiguity, but they did not consider talking about societal issues or behavioural approaches, even if they previously asserted the EU can be perceived as a big family. Only one of the respondents (Magda, 21 y.o., Romanian) deemed that *"I do not think the European Union has not left its own mark on our country because we lack communication and I strongly believe there is a long path up to accomplishing the process of Europeanization as a whole"*.

Likewise, the respondent from EaP member state, Nadia (20 y.o., Moldavian), remarked that *"it is not sufficient to be integrated in the European Union in order to act as European citizens. European leaders should promote more European projects"*. Also, Marga (20 y.o., Moldavian) mentioned that *"I feel European more than Australian, or American, of course. European countries*

*and people have a lot in common due to history and geography. There are certain differences too, which are normal and should be accepted by everyone. But I am sure that I will feel as a European citizen only after I have the same rights as the others and when I feel proud to share a common ground”.*

The dimension of the implementation of European laws was similarly treated by our Romanian and Moldavian respondents, regardless of their citizenship (EU member state or EaP member state), by arguing that the implementation of the European legislation is not important just as an obligation or a normative demand for the member states, but it is also an instrument to ensure a common perspective and a common ground for Europeans. The “unification” in legislation refers to different sectors such as migration, energy, pollution, environmental protection, terrorism, security, elections, etc. These common directives are important for linking European states, but as two of our respondents suggested, the aspect of linking peoples is not to be left aside.

For most of the Romanian respondents, the adherence of other Eastern countries such as the Republic of Moldova was considered as beneficial for the European Union as vice versa, but when being asked about the integration of Ukraine, 6 out of 7 declared that they do not approve of the adherence of Ukraine to the EU because of Russia’s requests. The denial for Ukraine had as base only military conflicts and the annexation of Crimea. Contrary to Romanians (EU citizens), almost all (6 out of 7) Moldavians (EaP citizens) declared they totally approve of the adherence of both countries. Notwithstanding, Sebi (21 y.o., Moldavian) avouched: *“First the issue has to be solved with Russia. We do not want to put in danger territories and citizens. Therefore, I am afraid that a big clash could happen and whatever Moldova and Ukraine have tried to achieve so far will be destroyed.”* He insisted that being a member of the Eastern Partnership is proper for this period of time and European concepts need to be implemented in the social structure of society before adhering. On the contrary, Romanians insisted that the more time passes, the more difficult will be for the Republic of Moldova to adapt to European demands and policies.

As far as the interest in becoming a European promoter is concerned, opinions are divided into the interest on promoting European ideas and the lack of interest for sharing with other unknown European people. A contrasting view can be found in Florina’s (20 y.o., Moldavian) answer: *“I doubt we are enough prepared for spreading European ideas among others. I think the best way to unfold this issue is by permitting European experts in communication to do their jobs.”* However, all the respondents acknowledge the importance of spreading European thoughts as for the growing of European interest and for assuming the European identity, not just as a claim for rights and obligations, but as a spiritual and cultural fact. In this vein, Cristina (20 y.o., Romanian) gives voice to the identity approach: *“The engagement of a person to become a European promoter is far more than a project. The promoter itself has to be convinced of his European*

*roots and has to transform European ideas into comprehensible ideas. I think the start comes from the educational system and town halls. Then, the next step is organizing citizens' meetings for receiving more explanations and for becoming aware of being European. I am a just a simple promoter among my relatives, not as for a full scale trial".*

Notably, we extract from these representative answers, the concept of exploring communication from each participant: some evaluate the power to communicate is not sufficiently administrated by the EU institutions (prevalingly Romanians' outlook – 6 out of 7 interviewees from the EU member state) and others (5 out of 7 interviewees from the EaP member state, Republic of Moldova) consider European actors as the most qualified for diffusing European thoughts and explaining the process of integration and Europeanization. In this case, we reveal the differences in thinking concerning vertical communication and horizontal communication, the last one being accentuated by Romanian students.

It is worth mentioning that for most of the questioned persons, the main channels for spreading European issues and debating them are the Internet and the civil society. Nevertheless, some of the Moldavian students consider that television is also very important because a lot of Moldavian citizens do not possess a computer or a smart phone for accessing online news. The same idea is mentioned by a Romanian student (Magda, 21 y.o.). In a more articulated manner, Alin (21 y.o., Romanian) stresses that *"civil society is a very important factor for spreading European issues, for discussing them at organized meetings and for exchanging ideas, but let us not forget that with the help of national institutions, we are able to remain in a non-evasive area of debate. Civil society must have limitations in the sense of not contorting European issues"*. The key issue at hand here is that all study participants from the EaP member state, Republic of Moldova, did not consider national institutions as potential diffusers of European ideas, contrary to expectations, because previous responses of Moldavian students insisted that the European ideas promoters should be the European institutions, revealing a more optimistic stand for European institutions than for national institutions. In this light, as an Eastern Partnership state, the Republic of Moldova should promote more the advantages of being a member through its national institutions, as a recommendation coming from both categories of students: EU citizens and EaP citizens.

Another view is brought to the fore by Marga (20 y.o., Moldavian): *"Different parts of the society use different channels to inform themselves. Speaking of Moldova, in Chisinau there is a big part of population that looks for information online, so they are more likely to be reached this way. Most of the people are still connected to the television, though, and they have the majority of the channels retransmitted from Russia. The local media is controlled politically, so spreading information freely is quite a problem. The civil society could be an option, if there were enough people ready to commit. In the countryside, people*

*need someone to explain to them those concepts in their own language.”* The answer of Marga is partially representative for all interviewees from the EaP member state, Republic of Moldova, but as a distinction, she states the essence of average vocabulary.

No matter the institutional ground or mass media area, the citizens of the EaP member state, Republic of Moldova, need people who share European information and who have skills in spreading the information among ordinary citizens. Here, we can pinpoint the view of Cristina (20 y.o., Romanian) who asserts that civil society has as components well-grounded citizens as poorly informed people, and the first category who also detain a social or political function is able to influence the rest of population, setting oneself up as an appropriate diffuser.

As far as the European identity is concerned, the great majority of Romanian respondents (6 out of 7) alleged that they feel as European citizens and that they found similarities between other Europeans such as Latin peoples (Italian, Spanish, French) or even with Slovenian or Polish people concerning life style or other cultural affinities. Moreover, Alin (21 y.o., Romanian) underscores that *“European identity exists in the heart of citizens inasmuch as the medium they live in is properly adapted to European standards. Identification with other Europeans might be done in a cultural or conceptive perspective, yet without denying political and economic systems”*. In contrast, Sebi (21 y.o., Moldavian) reported that *“...we do not need the EU in order to identify with others, although it might help us to come closer to each other”*. Marga (20 y.o., Moldavian) confirms the general trend of the Moldavians’ responses, stressing that *“the European identity should have its limits. There are advantages related to economics, politics, security and others, but identity is a delicate subject and should not be institutionalized or uniformed. I don’t identify myself with anyone. I have friends and acquaintances from different European and non-European countries and I can certainly say that their identity has nothing to do with our interactions.”*

When turning to the balance between European law system and the national one and discussing about citizens’ trust in the European system or the national one, the respondents from both states, the EU member and the EaP member, posited that they believed more in the European laws and values than in their national ones. To epitomize the answers of almost all interviewees (13 out of 14), we excerpt Vlad’s (19 y.o., Romanian) answer: *“I believe more in European laws because they are well elaborated, they have a visible impact and they usually turn out to be effective.”* In the same line of thought comes Marga’s (20 y.o., Moldavian) explanation: *“I do agree with the European values generally, but they are to be followed by the institutions and by public representatives. As for the laws, each law should be discussed in a context. There are European laws that are very good, but their true power is that they are applied and respected, which*



*is not the case of the national ones, at least in Moldova. The problem is, as always, the citizen.*” Only one respondent (Cristina, 20 y.o., Romanian) insisted that she has her own values that she applies and whatever country she lives in, she follows just her own system. As for the legal system, she sees the European one as the most secure.

The last item proposed to our interviewees provides another telling reflection upon the ongoing process of Europeanization and its completion. The responses of the EU citizens' from Romania varied from the impact of the educational projects (information given in schools) to horizontal communication between citizens and social actors. The key words expressed were “public debates” and “organized conferences” with a wider public, endorsing that online environment is not sufficiently developed in order to deliver secure information. A different picture was put forward by Moldavian students who talked about “investments in poor countries”, prosperity, reciprocal respect and less bureaucracy. However, similarly to Romanian students, Ina (19 y.o., Moldavian) agreed that communication is an important aspect for the ongoing process of Europeanization in the member states, among other issues. Still, the citizens of the EaP member state, as a reference group, do not acknowledge the importance of transparency in communication and the need to encourage public debates on European issues with specialized and non-specialized (but representative) parties.

These insights have several implications in the ongoing process of Europeanization and future integration. Young citizens are not indifferent to the emerging process and have abilities in communicating European ideas and in debating European issues, but they are aware of the fact that their attitudes towards the implementation of European legislation and spirit is just a slight contribution to the development of the European states. Young citizens insist that national and European institutions should be more active and vigorous in communicating European subjects. As a final point for clarifying the theme of new admissions, the young citizens of EaP member states (such as Moldavian students) are interested in becoming part of the European Union, but are aloof from the true understanding of collective identity, remaining attendants to economic views.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper provides a fresh look on the differences in perceiving Europeanization between the young citizens of a EU member state (Romania) and those belonging to a EaP member state (Republic of Moldova), regardless of common past or common projects. Participants' answers reveal the Romanians feeling of belonging to the European Union and a sense of community, while the desire of adhering to the political Union appears to dominate the Moldavian perspective.

What has come into light from this study calls for a new way of handling the process of Europeanization or even of new admissions: the societal aspects and the settlement of the European identity, as a secondly possessed identity, must not be ignored.

On the one hand, the EU citizens are aware of the societal limitations and communication problems which exist within the European Union and they are looking forward to real improvements in the communication space. On the other hand, the EaP citizens require more involvement from the EU institutions in promoting European Union and explaining, through specialized parties, the essence of being part of the entity.

The EU legislation was considered better than national legislation, by the respondents from both the EU and EaP states, although interviewees were aware of the fact that each country has its own manner of implementation and application.

The notion of collective identity seems to be very well understood by all respondents, although it is not assumed fairly by all of them and notable differences exist between the views of EU and EaP citizens. On one hand Romanian students recognize the lack of an European spirit and they blame the poor communication for which European institutions and national institutions are responsible and, on the other hand, Moldavian students perceive integration in the EU as a way of earning equal rights and a possibility to exchange experiences with other Europeans, by studying or working in other Western countries.

Students do not incline to a collective identity even though EU citizens see the necessity of this approach for the ongoing process of Europeanization. On the contrary, EaP citizens are not entirely open to what European integration means, or to what a new socio-political orientation could bring to their country. The economic preview is still successful and sufficient.

Our findings reveal that Romanian young citizens are aware of the true nature of Europeanization, that exceeds political aspects, going in a more profound area, of human being and his links to the others, but, at the same time, acknowledging is the first step for fulfilling. Stressing on the attitudes of Moldavian students towards being informed about the EU issues, all the respondents expect contiguity between European institutions and Moldavian people.

For the majority of respondents, communication is a relevant factor which contributes to the development of the European citizens among European and even non-European peoples. The interviewees from the EaP member state seemed to be more vigorous in admitting the European challenge than those from the EU state, which enhances the idea that an already obtained participation is not enough for strengthening connections with other member states. Romanians assume their status as Europeans and Moldavians want to achieve their goal in being admitted although the cultural approaches and societal aspects are pretty much abandoned.

Solidarity and the concept of common fate had been stated only by two Romanian interviewees. Correlatively, as far as the institutional exploitation is concerned, all the respondents demand a more interactive area, confirming that the Internet is superior to national institutions for EU issues discussion.

As a future research direction, we intend to carry on empirical work to understand the nexus between individual feelings of commitment, identification, and solidarity in European collective identities.

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