

For or Against the Eurozone? Romanian Students' Perspective on the Economic Crisis and Their Future as European Citizens

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Abstract. *In the context of globalization and of the aftermath of the economic crisis, the pillars on which the EU stands no longer satisfy the demands and necessities of the European citizens (Van Ham, 2005; Habermas, 2012). The euro crisis has generated, on one hand, a gap between the “center” and the “periphery” that can be correlated with the fragmentation both of the EU’s spheres of influence and of the European financial market (Dobrescu & Palada, 2012; EFCR, 2013). On the other hand, the euro crisis has generated a lack of solidarity and confidence in the European project. At this point, the major challenge for the European Union is not only the Euro-zone crisis, but also the level of confidence amongst young people. Recent polls (Gallup, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2013) indicate a dramatic rise in pessimism among Europe’s young people that have been labeled as “the Lost Generation” (European Commission, 2012). This paper explores the impact of the economic crisis on Romanian students’ attitudes towards the future of the European project and towards their European identity. The study aims at identifying the major concerns of Romanian students in terms of their future as European citizens. Our approach of this subject covers two perspectives: the first one is the utilitarian perspective, that is taking into consideration the actual advantages of the Europeanization process and the sustainability of the European social and economic model in the current national economic context; the second one is the identity perspective, that is taking into account the impact of the economic crisis on the Romanian students’ sense*

of belonging to the European community. The results of our study indicate that, overall, the Romanian youth holds an optimistic view concerning the EU; however they express some concerns in terms of lack of solidarity and fear of national identity loss.

Keywords: *economic crisis, European social model, euro, European identity, EU attitudes, Romania.*

Introduction

The European Union is facing a state of profound uncertainty, as the European project is being put under scrutiny. Under the influence of the financial and economic crisis of 2007 – 2008 the pillars on which the EU stands no longer satisfy the demands and necessities of the European citizens (Van Ham, 2005; Habermas, 2012). Among the most affected categories are the young people, as the economic crisis has left them with little or no opportunities in terms of finding a job, and building a future for themselves. Since unemployment and the lack of financial – and even social – security are the buzzwords in today's European Union (Tremmel, 2010), the trust level in the European Union has registered a downward shift: in 2008, the trust in European Union was at a high level of 50% (EB 69, Spring 2008), however in 2013 the level of trust has dropped to 31% (EB 80, Autumn 2013). Therefore, in the context of austerity measures, the European Union is facing a great amount of criticism both at a political and civic level. The key questions brought into debate are that of legitimacy of the EU, that of disbelief in the Union's common currency, the euro, that of lack of identification with the European Union.

Hence, this paper begins by introducing the economic context that underlies all the challenges that the EU nowadays has to face. We discuss the effects of the financial and economic crisis on the young individuals, then we focus on the European identity dimension, and, finally we bring forward the topic of self-interest in relation with the EU. Our main concern is to explore the connection between the economic crisis, the unfavourable attitudes of young people, and the perceived European identity among young Romanian individuals. In this sense, a qualitative approach was preferred, and, hence, we conducted a series of focus-groups, with young Romanians aged between 19-30 years old. On the basis of literature review (van Spanje & de Vreese, 2011; Leconte, 2010; McLaren, 2006), in order to evaluate the sceptic attitudes we take into consideration two dimensions: the utilitarian one and the identity one.

Although the economic crisis has raised many issues, highlighting the EU's vulnerabilities, our results show that young Romanians hold a rather favorable opinion about the EU – and that they associate it with positive aspects. The young people are considered the most important asset that EU has (Huber, 2013), and for this reason it is vital for the future of the European project to deliver the promised welfare that the European integration was supposed to bring. Considering the economic and political trends, it is not certain whether the young individuals will determine the EU's rise or fall. What is clear is the fact that, nowadays, the European Union is faced with a state of uncertainty and predicament.

The crisis of the European Union

The present day reality continues to be under the influence of the financial and economic crisis that started six years ago, and that still has serious effects on both the USA and Europe (Krugman, 2012; Verhofstadt, 2012). At the moment, the European Union has a heavy challenge to confront, as the crisis struck a Union that was under construction, and that had much vulnerability (Dobrescu, 2013; Bârgăoanu, 2011). Therefore, our aim is to highlight the key events that shaped the socio-economic context in Europe during the past six years, drawing attention, to the impact and effects of the financial and economic crisis on young people in Europe, and respectively in Romania.

For a better understanding of the consequences and effects of the financial and economic crisis, firstly, we need to take a look back and see what caused it all. The first signs of the financial crisis have started to show during the first half of 2007 on American soil (Soros, 2008; Krugman, 2009; Fitoussi & Le Cacheux, 2010; Bieling, 2012). Hence, on February 2007, Hong Kong & Shanghai Banking Corporation was shocking the entire world by stating that it was having “major financial problems” concerning their mortgage lending in the USA (Verhofstadt, 2012, p. 31), hence the trouble with loans became apparent. The problem was caused by the rise of mortgage delinquencies (Kotz, 2009), as subprime backed mortgages were on the rise (Soros, 2008). This subprime loan slump was, in turn, caused by the relaxed financial regulations that led to lax lending standards (Stiglitz, 2010; Krugman, 2012). However, it is not until 2008 that the crisis becomes evident and affects the entire financial system. The moment the housing bubble burst, it provoked a chain reaction affecting and exposing the financial sector. Several subprime mortgage lenders went bankrupt, such as the Lehman Brother, an investment bank, causing dread-

ful consequences for the US. This bankruptcy seems to be a triggering event that caused a lot of panic: confidence plunged, asset prices fell off, and the few remaining working channels of credit dried up (Krugman, 2009). Hence, what was considered to be a just subprime loan crisis develops into a full crisis, affecting the entire economy. The effects of the crisis were devastating for many people: their homes were foreclosed, their businesses failed, their employers laid them off.

Europe, and respectively the European Union, was thought not to be affected by the American crisis, however, this scenario proved to be wrong. This economic crisis that broke out in the US is now considered to be one of the most severe crisis since the Great Recession of the 1930s (Krugman, 2009; Kotz, 2009; Verhofstadt, 2012). It has affected the stability of the financial and economic sectors worldwide, the EU being no exception, as Krugman (2011) points out: "Europe suffered a severe slump in the wake of the global financial meltdown". The first sign that Europe was in trouble was given when BNP Paribas, a French bank, froze some of its investment funds, the invoked reason being the problems on the American market with the subprime loans. Next, it was when a British bank, Northern Rock, needed help from the Bank of England, that the truth was exposed: Europe was not immune to the subprime slump. The housing bubbles were present in Europe, as well, and countries like the UK, Spain or Ireland immediately felt the consequences when these bubbles burst. At that moment, the crisis in Europe was no longer a hypothetical situation, and as Krugman (2009) states: "the first great financial crisis of the twenty-first century had begun" (p.165). During 2008, several banks were taken over by the states all over Europe: in Denmark, the UK, Belgium, and Netherlands (Verhofstadt, 2012). Ireland was among the countries most affected by the crisis together with Greece, and in Spain unemployment skyrocketed (Verhofstadt, 2012; Krugman, 2009). In the East-European countries the situation was not any brighter, Romania, being a victim, as well. The Romanian currency dropped 20% in value and in order to overcome the devastating effects of the crisis, Romanian officials loaned over 20 billion euro from the IMF and the ECB (Aslund, 2010), Romania's budget deficit in 2009 amounting to 36.4 billion, i.e. 7.2% of GDP (Chelu, 2010). In the same time, the planned date of the accession of Romania in Eurozone was several times postponed. Supplementary aspects related with the exchange rates in Romania, as well as in other Eastern European countries have manifested (Anghel & Dinu, 2013; Anghel et al., 2014).

In addition, the crisis of 2008 has highlighted great imbalances between European Union member states (Kattel, 2010; Dobrescu, 2013). Radu, Boțan and

Corbu (2013) argue that the EU is divided into regions. In this sense, there is a clear distinction made by specialists (Dobrescu, 2013; Dobrescu & Palada, 2012; Buitier, 2011) in terms of core vs. periphery. The distinction between 'core' and 'periphery' is, therefore, made when debating the newly integrated countries, referring to old versus new member states, on the one hand, and on the other hand when discussing the South versus the North, in terms of economic performance (Radu et al., 2013). Other specialists (Dobrescu & Palada, 2012; Buitier, 2011) state that the concept of "periphery" is used just in relation to the countries facing serious financial difficulties. The economic crisis has underlined even further this division between member states, exposing the European project to much criticism in terms of the legitimacy of European integration (Wilde & Trenz, 2012).

However, the Union's main weakness was caused by its common currency: the euro. In this sense, Stiglitz (2012) states that the EU member states adopted the euro without making the necessary political and institutional arrangements to ensure its success and for this reason Europe will have to face a high price. This viewpoint is shared by other specialists (Krugman 2009, 2011, 2012; Habermas, 2012; Costa Fernandes & Mota, 2011; Aslund, 2010), who also underline that countries that share the common currency are highly vulnerable. Therefore, the Eurozone countries must decide "between a deepening of European cooperation and relinquishing the euro" (Habermas, 2012, p.122). Following this line of thought, Hall (2012, p. 355) states that in the last years Europe has been struggling "to resolve the debt problems facing Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain (the GIIPS) without breaking up the monetary union or precipitating a wider". After 2007 and 2008 financial markets were greatly affected, and, as a consequence, the European Union was severely afflicted because of the increasing debt, while fiscal deficits rose for several countries with leading economies (Lap vistas, 2012). At the European level, the effects were seen in imbalances between member states that left the peripheral countries vulnerable to the crisis. Hence, the sovereign debt crisis that broke out was caused, as expected, by the financial and economic crisis of 2007-8, and in the same time, by the "precarious integration of peripheral countries in the Eurozone" (Lapavitsas et al., 2012, p.26). Nevertheless, Hall (2012, p.361) comes with an explanation, stating that a "basic asymmetry was built into EMU from its inception". This asymmetry was given by differences between institutional frameworks in northern and southern political economies. On the one hand, northern countries had well suited policies and growth strategies that led to their economic welfare, and, on the other hand, southern economies entered the monetary union unprepared and ill

equipped to the effective competition within the union (Hall, 2012). These imbalances that led to the sovereign debt crisis have brought about a great amount of stress concerning the cohesion of the Eurozone (Costa Fernandes & Mota, 2011). Similarly, Schmitz and von Hagen (2011) put forward the idea that while concerns about the sustainability of the monetary union have been risen, there is evidence that a deepening in financial market integration in the euro area is already taken place.

Moreover, the effects of the financial and economic crisis and the newly exposed flaws in the construction of the economic and monetary union made Euroseptics to take a “reluctant step in the direction of integration” (Habermas, 2012, p.129). This context, hence, fuels more and more skeptical concerns in reference with the European project and European integration. Consequently, recent studies (Pew Research Center, 2013; Gallup, 2013; Eurofound, 2012) show that the level of confidence in the European Union among its citizens has significantly decreased due to the economic and financial turmoil. Attitudes towards the European integration may, therefore, be affected by this economic context that highlighted the Union’s many vulnerabilities. This is in accordance with previous literature (Garry & Tilley, 2009; Eichenberg & Dalton, 2007; McLaren, 2006) that shows that economic factors are important determinants of citizens’ attitudes towards the EU. When it comes to attitudes in the European Union, they have always been divided, as there have always been supporters and opposers to European integration. As Fliegstein (2008, p. 4) points out, the source of conflict may arise from the gap between those who “participate and benefit from Europe directly and those who do not”, especially at the moment, when this gap became more evident due to the disparities between member states caused by the crisis. Some authors (Wilde & Trenz, 2012) even put forward the idea the entire European project – with its basic purpose and rationale - is nowadays contested, along with its future trajectory.

The situation is all the more dramatic for the young European citizens, as the effects of the crisis had taken a great toll in their concern. Since one of the immediate consequences was the sudden rise in unemployment (Krugman, 2012), the young people were among the most vulnerable. Krugman (2012) states that, now, it is the worst time to be a young individual in search for a job, especially if you live in Europe. If we take a look at the numbers, they illustrate an alarming situation: youth unemployment rate in EU28 is more than double than unemployment rates for all ages (Eurostat, 2014). According to Eurostat (2014) data the overall unemployment rate in the EU28 reached 10.8% in 2013, while youth unemployment reached at the end of the same year

23.1%. In what concerns the Romanian youth, their situation is even grimmer, as the rate of unemployment is higher than the EU youth average, reaching 23.6%. Consequently, the young people nowadays have been labeled the 'lost generation' (FutureLab, 2013) due to the fact that their particular situation is rather dramatic. As pointed before, young people are unemployed and due to the hardships and the labor market regulations, jobs scarce and insecure. Moreover, Krugman (2012) underlines that about one in five graduates is unemployed or working part-time and is underpaid. This situation described by Krugman (2012) is also concordant with the Romanian reality, as "half of high school and university graduates cannot find a job" on the Romanian market (FutureLab, 2013, p. 24). The young people are "trapped in a limbo of unemployment, underemployment or an endless cycle of education because of a lack of job opportunities" (FutureLab, 2013, p. 4). Hence, the young individuals, aged roughly between 18 and 35, belonging to the so called "lost generation", are characterized to be overqualified, to have low salaries and low job security and satisfaction, in the best case scenario. On the other hand, in the worst case, young individuals have no qualifications, no employment, and have even fewer opportunities on the labour market. The major issues and concerns when it comes to the "lost generation" are that they face greater uncertainty and economic insecurity, that, in turn, cause them to be insecure about their future, to have a low self-esteem, to lose their sense of identity, to be disengaged from society and politics, to fail inadvertently to retain their freedom and independence, as they need to return to live with their parents (FutureLab, 2013, European Commission, 2012; Eurofund, 2012). Taking these facts into consideration, we can better understand the decline in trust when it comes to the European Union, as it is only natural for young individuals to become more pessimistic (Eurofund, 2012), as the Union's promised welfare was not achieved in their concern.

The pragmatic dimension of European identity

In the age of globalization, a major challenge for individuals is represented by the identity range of options that they can choose from a basis for developing a sense of belonging to different communities. Identity represents „a surrogate for communities" (Bauman, 2001, p.10), a social construct that results from the necessity of individuals of belonging to certain social groups and to „imagined communities" (Anderson, 2006) by which they can fulfill their need for security. Various changes that interfere in social, political and economic contexts generate egocentric attitudes due to a reevaluation of priori-

ties and necessities on behalf of the individuals (Karolewski & Kaina, 2012). As a result, individuals hold multiple identities that in specific contexts coexist, overlap, fact that is also eloquent concerning the complementary relationship between national identity and European identity.

By reference to the European Union and the enlargement process, identity represents a social construct and a catalyst for promoting peace, democracy and prosperity. The emergence of a European identity based on the formation pattern of nation-states remains questionable due to the fact that on the pressure of globalization, the geographical and psychological barriers that demarcate the European space haven't been clearly defined yet (Delanty & Rumford, 2005; Kaina & Karolewski, 2009). As a consequence, the European identity is still weak, compared to national identities or other types of collective identities (ethnic, religious etc.) starting from the following considerations: individuals exhibit a weak emotional attachment to the European Union, despite their recognition as members of the European community; solidarity and loyalty of individuals towards the European Union is contextual, depending on national and personal interests; the status of European citizen doesn't induce feelings of pride or commitment, on the contrary generates xenophobic attitudes and ethnocentrism through the social process of exclusion; in the absence of a European consciousness, the political and cultural symbols have a slight resonance for individuals (Berting, 2006, pp.70-71).

The concept of European identity can be analyzed from different points of view taking into account its cultural, civic or utilitarian components (Jimenez, 2004). On the one hand, several theories emphasize that the individual's emotional sense of belonging to the European community is shaped by elements such as historical heritage and a common European culture (Bruter, 2003, 2005; Inthorn, 2006). In contradiction with the thesis mentioned above, the theory on constitutional patriotism stresses that European identity is based on civic elements and represents a form of attachment of citizens towards political institutions through universally accepted democratic values (Lacroix, 2002; Habermas, 2004; Mueller, 2007).

In line with the instrumental approach, European identity is being conceived as primarily pragmatic. Therefore, individual's membership towards the European community depends on the results of a cost-benefit analysis of the economic consequences of the process of Europeanization on their lives (Kaltenthaler & Anderson, 2001; Hooghe & Marks, 2004; Tănășoiu & Colonescu, 2008; Frunzaru & Corbu, 2012). As a consequence, individuals define

themselves as European citizens in accordance with the concrete advantages provided by the European integration process and their personal interests. When analyzing European identity, research indicates that young people internalize a sense of belonging to the European community mainly in pragmatic terms (Frunzaru & Corbu, 2012; European Commission, 2013; Udrea, Udrea & Țugmeanu, 2013). Tfasos (2006) states that young Europeans have the tendency to share a collective identity only in good times, while in times of social and economic insecurity rely on their national identity. This approach is inconsistent with the results of the most recent European Commission Report (2013, p. 16) suggesting that despite the negative economic trends affecting the Eurozone, young Europeans are rather optimistic concerning their future as European citizen due to concrete benefits that are relevant to their needs and aspirations: obtaining appropriate qualifications, building their professional career and securing good living conditions”.

Attitudes towards the EU and self-interest

When addressing attitudes of support or opposition towards the European integration process in relation to the utilitarian approach, we can distinguish between two divergent perspectives that take into consideration economic factors, respectively identity aspects. Lauren McLaren (2006) proposes two theoretical models that are predominant among utilitarian approach concerning individuals attitudes towards European integration: egocentric utilitarianism that emphasizes the fact that individuals support for the European project depends on the maximization of personal interests and economic benefits that directly impact the standards of living (Palmer & Gabel, 1999; Gabel, 2009); secondly, the sociotropic utilitarianism, that examines the attitudes of support towards the EU by taking into consideration the consequences of the European integration process on the national economy (Garry& Tilley, 2007). The egocentric utilitarianism approach indicates that the demarcation between the winners and losers of the European integration process is made through the differentiated economic costs and benefits for each European citizen. Therefore, individuals with higher education and professional skills (students, managers, entrepreneurs etc.) show a positive attitude towards the European integration process can adapt more easily and are able to identify significant opportunities in the context of the liberalization of capital markets. Conversely, European citizens with average education and low income express rather skeptic attitudes concerning the positive effects of the process of European integration on national economy (McLaren, 2006, p.32).

Unlike the egocentric utilitarianism theory that analyses the political attitudes of individuals towards the process of European integration in relation to personal interests and social status, the sociotropic utilitarianism approach focuses on the consequences of the Europeanization process on national economy. The support or opposition attitudes towards the European project are influenced by two major economic factors: in the first place, *the European Union budget* and the differentiated economic contribution of each member state causing a major gap between beneficiaries and main contributors; secondly, *the elimination of regulations and trade barriers* in order to establish free trade zones for increasing competition across markets (McLaren, 2006, p.44). Despite the positive effects of the European integration process on national economies, the current crisis has generated „economic xenophobia” (Garry & Tilley, 2007, p.184) and a defensive European identity against immigrants.

The opposition attitudes against the European Union are grounded on utilitarian aspects, but are also influenced by the emotional attachment and loyalty of individuals towards the nation-state. Hence, the process of European integration represents a threat to the sovereignty of the nation-state, to national cultures and identities (Carey, 2002; Marks & Hooghe, 2003; McLaren, 2002, 2004; Netjes, 2004; Netjes & Kersbergen, 2004). Lauren McLaren (2002) emphasizes that „antipathy toward the EU is not just about cost/benefit calculations or about cognitive mobilization ...but about fear of, or hostility toward, other cultures” (p.553). In specific contexts, through political discourses and the inference of politics in everyday life, national identity becomes dominant in relation to personal and economic interests. Therefore, the process of European integration is perceived by the citizens as a threat to the integrity of the nation state, the legitimacy of its political institutions and cultural heritage. This idea is also supported by some authors indicating that Euro, one of the most representative markers of European identity and integration process is used as a tool for manipulating European citizens through the reproduction of national symbols (Bruter, 2003, 2004; Kaina & Karolewski, 2009). Conversely, Jacques Hymans (2004) suggests that euro currency represents an important indicator for the development of a European demos and not an instrument for indoctrination. Although, at a symbolic level, Euro embodies the federalist vision on the European project, at present, values such as economic and political cohesion, no longer hold the same resonance and meaning for political elites and European citizens.

Research design

This article aims to analyze from a utilitarian and an identity perspective the impact of the economic crisis on Romanian students' attitudes towards the future of the Eurozone and, implicitly, towards their future as European citizens. Therefore, we focus on the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Romanian students imagine the future of the Eurozone?

RQ2: Do Romanian students perceive the Euro as threat to national economy and national identity?

RQ3: Are the positive attitudes of Romanian students' towards the EU driven only by pragmatic interests or are they, also, linked to emotional bonds?

In order to address these research questions we adopted a qualitative approach. Consequently, we conducted 3 focus groups. Our sample comprised 24 students, aged between 19 to 30 years, enrolled in Bachelor degree programs at the following public learning and research institutions: College of Management - The National School of Political Studies and Public Administration; respectively, Faculty of International Business and Economics - Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

The grid for our analysis is twofold, consisting of the following dimensions: *the utilitarian dimension*, that emphasizes the perception Romanian students hold towards the future of the Eurozone, correlated with the costs and benefits that derive from their European citizenship; and *the identity one*, centered on the social identification of Romanian students with the European community and the way they perceive themselves as Europeans. The *utilitarian dimension* comprises several questions regarding: the process of Europeanization and its effects on national economy; the impact of the economic crisis on the stability of the Eurozone, business markets and standards of living; the competitiveness of the European social and economic model on the global market; euro adoption in Romania. *The identity dimension* reference questions are constructed by taking into consideration the following aspects: the pragmatic pattern of construction of European identity (actual benefits and advantages associated with being a European citizen); the relevance of the European values for Romanian students; the impact of the economic crisis on Romanian students' sense of belonging to the European community; and the effects of the Europeanization process on national identity and national culture.

Results and discussion

On the first analyzed dimension, *the utilitarian one*, Romanian students emphasize the fact that the process of European integration has improved the living standards and the economic development of Romania but only at a small scale: *We don't need to wait for the EU to solve our social, political and justice problems ... but we must admit that different aspects concerning corruption, unemployment have improved, but are not so noticeable* (Bianca); *It has helped Romania in certain ways, but Europeanization doesn't mean economic equality like in the communist period* (Mihai). The negative references concerning the Europeanization process relate to the deliberate preservation of economic disparities and competition between member states but also to the incapacity of national institutions to adapt to the new climate of change imposed at a continental level. In this context, the promised economic welfare is seen only as an utopia and the Europeanization process only another form of oppression: *The Europeanization process has help other countries but destroyed most of the Romanian economy* (Radu); *There will always be countries that work for others and this system of oppression will never disappear* (Alexandra); *EU has its own interests, they wanted us only as a name, for a more positive image and credibility* (Adela).

For most of the respondents, the current economic situation has highlighted the fact that the European social and economic model is not sustainable and cannot be a source for gaining competitive advantage on a global market anymore: *We are moving towards social collapse* (Oana); *We are not competitive with Americans, we do not have the same ways of making business on an international level, we still have taxes between us so it isn't really a free trade zone. There is only a competition between member states* (Andreea). One of the respondents states that the consumerist European model has lost its relevance in the current economic reality and that citizens must support economic recovery of Romania through the consumption of traditional products instead of those labeled under „Made in the EU”: *The model itself is a problem. Each country must protect its industry and we must be aware that we can have jobs only if we encourage the consumption of Romanian and not foreign products* (Ioana).

The current struggle that Eurozone is facing has been generated not only by economic factors but also by the hostility and lack of solidarity between

member states causing a gap between the core and the peripheral areas of the European Union. Romanian students emphasized that economic cohesion between member states is a double-edged sword used by the most powerful countries of the Union to run in debt the beneficiary countries: *I do not believe in solidarity between member states regarding the economic crisis. It will always apply the law of jungle: the lion is the king* (Mihai); *There can't be all for one and one for all. It's not right that only some countries get help* (Mădălina); *If to borrow money from the main contributors means solidarity this helps the country only in a short term ... with excessively high gearing and high rates of interest you can never recover* (Călin). Conversely, for some of the respondents solidarity remains a fundamental European value that stands at the core of the European project: *The negative effects of the crisis can be exceeded only through economic cohesion and solidarity between member states. After all, what's the point of the EU if not unity?* (Gabriela); *The social and economic problems must be solved through cooperation; it's a partnership* (Mădălina).

A general opinion concerning the euro adoption in 2019 by Romania represents an unrealistic scenario due to the lack of economic competitiveness of the country and the fragile European economy. The major concerns of the respondents in relation to Romania's future status of becoming a member of the Euro area are economic instability, high interest rates and higher prices, based on the major differences between Eastern and Western economies: *Romania should keep its currency because it's stable. Every time a national currency is changed a series of financial problems arise* (Andrei); *Romania adopting Euro would mean national starvation* (Călin); *We are too poor to join the Eurozone* (Bianca); *The changes would be too high: the same wages, but higher prices of products ... Romania is not ready for this* (Alexandra), *Romania is not sufficiently prepared to adopt the euro* (Ștefana). Only one of the respondents states that „Euro currency itself cannot generate benefits or ruin national economy. Other factors are involved (Ana), emphasizing the importance of politics on this matter.

In relation to the austerity measures that were taken by national governments and imposed at a continental level for the survival of the monetary Union, the respondents emphasized the fact that these measures were a necessity, such as the existence of the European project itself. At the same time, participants on this study appreciate that European Union interference in national economy through fiscal policies and collecting taxes results from the obligations and responsibilities that derive from the status of being a member of the Union and a European citizen: *As long as the future of the European Union is at stake*

they have the authority to impose certain rules (Andreea); When it comes to austerity measures you take it as a given(...) it is naturally to obey to this laws as a European citizen or you will not be part of the Union anymore (Laura); They have the right to collect taxes from citizens because we are part of the European economy... For example, most of the investors on FMCG industry are foreign, so the money returns to European Union (Călin). In addition, participants stated that the economic crisis has affected them in terms of less job opportunities, less options when it comes to choosing a faculty: *The crisis has limited my options in choosing a faculty. Now, I have to be much more careful when I choose a faculty, a career (Silvia).*

With regard to the way *European identity* is defined in the case of Romanian students, most of the participants on the study correlate their membership towards the European community according to their personal interests and benefits that derive from their European citizenship. Hence, the status of European citizen implies a series of advantages such as mobility, job opportunities and studying abroad: *For me, being a European citizen doesn't mean something special...but I have access to financial and educational resources, a different lifestyle (Andreea); For me, as a student and European citizen, the most important benefits relate to economic, social and intercultural aspects (Bogdan); Being a European citizen gives you a certain comfort that you don't have as a Romanian citizen (Gabriela).* Two of the respondents state that the process of European integration has not minimized economic and social inequalities between member states and, as a consequence, the benefits are not evenly distributed to all European citizens: *As a student I don't feel any benefits from the Europeanization process. I don't have money to travel or to study abroad (Mihai); It's about social status and nationality. In terms of employment opportunities we are not treated equally (Dan).* When it comes to define themselves as being Europeans, the participants on this study do not exhibit a sense of pride towards the EU.

For Romanian students, European citizenship comes as a given and implies a set of rights, obligations and benefits, ensuring them security: *The fact that I can travel in Europe without formalities doesn't give me any sense of pride (Alina); Being a European citizen doesn't make me more special and I don't define myself in this terms (Ana); It gives you safety in addition to being a Romanian citizen and we all know how things work here (Mihai).*

The preservation of national traditions and values are of great importance for Romanian youth, shaping their identity. In this context, the process of Euro-

pean integration represents a threat to national culture and spirit of Romanian people and at the same time a different form of globalization that leads to uniformization of cultures: *We don't know who we are anymore: Romanians or Europeans...they want us to forget our history and traditions* (Mihai); *We have lost our values. We had a different lifestyle, different traditions, we lost our pride in being Romanian* (Alexandra). An interesting take on the matter is offered by three of the respondents stating that in the communist period, unity and national distinctiveness were best preserved, although this came with a high price: loss of freedom. Conversely, other respondents emphasize the plurality of European cultures and diversity of Europe suggesting that unity in diversity still remains the pillar for further integration: *I believe that culture belongs to everybody and we should learn from each other* (Alina); *I do not perceive Europeanization as a threat, more as a bonus, because it helps us develop as nation* (Bogdan). *The European Union represents a cultural union. You, as a citizen, have direct access to other cultures. Bonds are formed between people, ideas and traditions, as long as you are open* (Anca).

Conclusion

Even though the economic crisis has underlined many vulnerabilities of the European project, Romanian young people do not seem to be very pessimistic about its future, although they have some reservations. Interestingly, Romanian individuals put under scrutiny the weak solidarity between member states and from here some issues might emerge in terms of the feasibility of the European project. Young people consider that the economic crisis has brought disparities between member states, highlighting the incapacity of national institution to adapt to the regulations imposed at the EU level. Hence, we can infer their lack of trust in national institutional management and their disbelief in an economic welfare in what Romania is concerned. Their reservations are highlighted by the consequences of the economic crisis in terms of the unsustainable European economic and social model. The crisis has taken its toll in young people concern, as they are a generation labeled 'the lost generation', as they have to face many difficulties such as unemployment and lack of opportunities, all under the context of a great financial and economic turmoil. In the same time, our research reveals that the economic crisis has underlined the dichotomy between 'core' and 'periphery', referring to the fact that young people perceive a gap between Romania, an emerging economy and Western Europe, and older, more stable economies. Furthermore, the economic crisis brought much instability in the Eurozone and in young Romanians opinion

the country is not ready to adopt the euro, emphasizing the importance of politics in this matter.

In relation to attitudes towards the European Union, young Romanians are not skeptical, as they admit that that European integration has brought economic development and higher living standards. Moreover, when it comes to the way they perceive the membership of Romania to the European community, the research showed that young individuals correlate it with the cost-benefit of the economic consequences to the process of integration. This finding is in accordance with previous literature (Kaltenthaler & Anderson, 2001; Hooghe & Marks, 2004; Tanasoiu & Colonescu, 2008; Frunzaru & Corbu, 2012), as young Romanians put a lot of emphasis on the benefits they gain as a result of the country's membership, such as mobility and studying opportunities. On the other hand, a few concerns appear as the costs of the European integration may highlight the economic and social imbalances between member states. Therefore, we notice, once again, that the gap between poorer and richer European countries becomes a matter of interest for the young individuals. These inequalities, as seen before, are a consequence of the economic crisis that has underlined the differences between the North and the South in terms of economic policies.

When it comes to the sense of identification with the EU, there are two distinct trends. On the one hand, there are those who feel the need to preserve the national identity and their cultural distinctiveness, as they feel threaten not only by the Europeanization process, but also by globalization, in general. Hence, there is an opposition to the European integration in terms of fear of identity loss and fear of other cultures. Nevertheless, this opposition is not expressed in terms of threat to the nation state. On the other hand, there are those who emphasize importance of cultural diversity, which represents a pillar for the European Union. In addition, as previous studies show (European Commission Report, 2013) young individuals perceive their European identity in terms of benefits that are relevant for their ambitions and objectives. Hence, young Romanians, are inclining towards an egocentric utilitarianism (McLaren, 2006), their support for the EU being conditioned by their personal interests.

Overall, our research confirms that Romanians have rather optimistic view in terms of the European Union and European integration, in spite of the negative economic context affecting the Eurozone. Nevertheless, a slight downward shift in trust can be felt, as for young Romanians preserving the

national traditions and values holds great importance. Additionally, Romanian youth expressed concerns in relation with the weak solidarity between member states, the crisis having provoked the gap between core and periphery. In this context, the general idea is that Romanian youth seem to be at a crossroad when it comes to their attitudes and sense of identity to the European Union.

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