Constructing narratives of political identities: young people in the 'new' European states

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This chapter focuses on young people's narratives in constructing their sense of identities with their country, and how these are used to distinguish themselves as a generation distinct from their parents and grandparents. The study is of 13 to 19 year olds in twelve European countries that were formerly in the communist bloc, and have since joined (or are joining) the European Union. Their discussions of the meanings their country had for them raise questions about their use of political discourse, their expressions of feelings of patriotism, and their sense of agency in their own and their county's future. These are analyzed through Bruter's (2005) lens of civic and cultural engagement with a country, and the relationship between generational shifts in political identity and historical transitions in society suggested by Fulbook (2011).

This chapter analyses how some young people in post-communist Europe construct narratives of identity with their country, their sense of agency, and their constructions of themselves as generationally different from their parents and grandparents. Based on data from focus groups with young people between 12 and 19 from twelve countries which joined the European Union in 2004-13, I argue that many of these young people demonstrate a sophisticated ability to construct a range of narratives with their country and with the European Union that show a complex and

contingent pattern of identities. They talk about politics, their political self and agency, and of belonging to various geo-political entities such as the nation/country and the European Union.

These twelve countries both have elements in common and some significant differences in their political histories. Some of them were new, or newly independent, following the break up of the Soviet Union (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), or of Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia [in the process of joining the European Union]), or of Czechoslovakia (the Czech Republic and Slovakia); others had been countries under Soviet hegemony (Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia itself). None of these states existed in their present boundaries in 1914; all had been devastated by the 1939-45 war; and all had experienced various forms of authoritarian repression between 1945 and 1989.

The teenagers whose constructions are analyzed in this study were all, therefore, members of the first generation born after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. This is not to homogenize the histories of all these countries, each had its own particular trajectory, but in each the construction of a political narrative of the state in which these young people live is being carried out under very different circumstances to those of their parents or grandparents when they were young. These young people have no direct experiences of the regimes, wars, uprisings and assertions of independence with which many of their parents and grandparents were involved.

Leccardi and Feixa (2012) have suggested that young people in Eastern Europe are more tied to the memories of the family than are young people in Western Europe. They argue that their prolonged and necessary cohabitation with their parents means that they continue to be brought up within the remnants of the post-communist

context of their family life, they "have to come to grips on a daily basis with the legacy of the former Soviet-style socialism" (Leccardi and Feixa 2012, 5). Such a hypothesis is not borne out by the evidence of the young people in this study (see also Dimitrova-Grajzl and Simon 2010, Macek *et al.* 1998). More compelling is the argument put forward by Fulbrook (2011), whose study of German identities in the 20th century suggests that there are not only significant differences in the ways that identities are constructed between generations, but that these are the consequence of political fractures and dissonance in national society. Fulbrook (2011) argues that the age at which people experience key historical moments, such as the transitions within German society in 1933, 1945 and 1989, can be a critical explanatory factor behind an individual or group's 'availability for mobilization' for political expression. This "construction of a collective identity on the basis of generationally defined common experiences" (2011, 11) is used to explain the rise of National Socialism and the post-war politics of the Germanys. Age, she suggests, is "crucial at times of transition, with respect to the ways in which people can become involved in new regimes and societies" (2011, 488).

Identification with a geo-political institution – such as a state or the European Union - is multidimensional. Bruter (2005) suggests two major components of identity with a political community:

> A *cultural* perspective would analyze political identities as the sense of belonging an individual citizen feels towards a particular political group. This group can be perceived by him [sic] to be defined by a certain culture, social similarities, values, religion, ethics or even ethnicity…
> A *civic* perspective would see… the identification of citizens with a civic structure, such as the State, which can be defined as the set of institutions, rights, and rules that preside over the political life of the community.
> (Bruter 2005, 12)

Bruter was writing specifically with reference to the development of a 'European identity', but his model also holds with respect to the construction of state

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or national identities. He contends that these two components exist in parallel in citizens' minds, and need to be differentiated when possible. For example, individuals may have stronger civic or cultural elements to their (European) identity, with differences between individuals, countries, and over periods of time. Using a questionnaire with UK, French and Netherlands respondents (n=212) he offers evidence of "a civic component… [that] makes people identify with the European Union as significant 'superstate' identity, and … a cultural component that makes people identify with Europe in general as an area of shared civilization and heritage" (2005, 114). He speculates that a common European heritage might be too much of abstraction, and supports this with focus group data from the same three countries: "civic unity is a major determinant of the level of European identity of citizens" (2005, 162).

This differentiation of cultural and civic references is core to the analysis of young people which follows, in how they identify both with Europe and their country. It will become evident that the competing poles of the cultural and the civic jockey for position contingently and temporally in the ways that young people construct and use their identities. Their identification with each of these employs aspects of these two components in varying degrees, depending on the particular moment and the particular focus of discussion. What political discourses do they utilize in constructing their identities as members of a country that is so different to the nation of their parents' youth? How do they respond to these constructions – do they feel empowered to actively engage in social and political affairs, or do they feel that they lack agency and alienated from the political? Do they construct themselves politically as different: has there been a generational shift?

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Young people's political discourse

Political discourse is sometimes presumed to be solely the domain of the politician, but van Dijk (1997) argues we "should also include the various *recipients* in political communicative events … once we locate politics and its discourses in the public sphere, many more participants in political communication appear on the stage" (van Dijk 1997, 13). Deliberation, decision and action are defining political activities, and politics is about discourse in the context of disagreement, conflicts and of inequalities in power (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012). In this chapter I argue that young people are not simply recipients of political communications, but actively debate and internalize such discourse, and use it to contribute to the construction of their own political and social identities.

Many studies of political socialization have cast young people as passive recipients of political messages from the social environment (eg Hahn 1998). The attitudes of teachers and education policy makers towards dealing with political and social controversies in school may be critical: teacher and institutional resistance to the controversial may be part of a denial that young people can understand or have an interest in the political (Maitles 1997). Qualitative studies that seek out political understanding suggest that there is more taking place. As Coles (1968), a psychiatrist reviewing his transcripts of 25 years, explains:

> we have found ourselves surprised by our chronic inability even to recognize the political implications of what we were hearing from children …We have tried to understand why it took us so long… to regard our data… as a sort of running political commentary by boys and girls who were… involved in dramatic moments in history.
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> (Coles 1986, 8-9)

Furnham and Stacey (1991, 33) point out that most research on political socialization regards young people as "passive interpreters of the political information that they receive". However, they also point out that young people seek political

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information, and sometimes reject it, selecting and changing it to fit their own interpretive framework. Thomas's (2009) study of children and young people's political participation argues that many studies over the past two decades have focused on adult-led activities, in which children's spaces and autonomy have been restricted. What is needed, he claims, are studies of children as political actors and of the micro-politics of children's interactions with each other and with adults. But Alderson (2010) has pointed to Thomas's (and others) tendency to focus on small empirical personal micro-communication studies that exclude and disadvantage children making only fairly brief references to political context, and consequently politics remains a "crucially neglected topic in childhood studies" (2010, 429).

In the field of political geography, Philo and Smith (2003) suggest that there is a common disregard for young people's conceptions of geo-political spaces (such as countries), and that this is a consequence of young people's limited availability to directly influence the more obvious 'political' phenomenon and structures that are to do with nation and states. Skelton (2008, 26) attempts to addresses this omission in her conceptualization of young people as "agentic in making their own socio-spatial worlds". She argues that because they are part of our social structures, we "need to capture their commentaries on the social world around them" (2008, 26). She elsewhere develops this argument: the very fact that their position is "liminal … within political-legal structures and institutional practices … makes them extremely interesting political subjects" (Skelton 2010, 146). This chapter will offer some examples of young people offering critical commentaries on their relevant political practices and structures, as they construct their identities within various available geo-political spaces.

Jens (2004) observes that young people are "strikingly sensitive about global social themes like the environment and peace. Again, this chapter offers a range of empirical evidence in support. But Jens also notes that society mainly plays upon this sensitivity and these observations in a limited educative manner. This sensibility of children is mainly considered as a "solid base for future citizenship and only rarely as a base for actual citizenship" (2004, 31). In this present study, it was notable how often young people said that they would not, or could not, talk about these issues in an educational setting.

Kallio, analyzing largely data from children younger than those considered in this chapter, offers a definition of children's politics as "intentional social activity which has particular meaning to its performer" (Kallio 2009, 8). She argues that children's empowerment and agency is situational, a tactical use of opportunities to "momentarily …politicize an issue important to them" (Kallio 2008, 12). Katz argues that such agency needs to be more widely recognized: "children are not just repositories of adults' desires and fantasies, but also subjects and social actors in their own rights" (Katz 2008 9; also Habashi 2009). The data analyzed in this study evidences the active engagement of many young people with social and political ideas, and their recognition that they have decisions to make and options to choose that are not simply personal choices, but ones that impact on and interact with their societies. They have agency, and they are very aware of this. Kallio and Häkli (2011) have identified and criticized what they see as the two major current research streams. There are those that focus on children's agency and role in local and national policy (such as Thomas and Skelton) – but although these seek to empower children's voices in the public agenda, they also determine and constrain this agenda and thus exclude some young people by requiring specific forms of political action (Kallio and Häkli

2011:22-23). Secondly, there is a research stream that address children's everyday lives in relation to political issues relevant to particular young people, that may be, for example, economy or war (for example, Katz and Habashi) – but such a research agenda excludes the voices of those who are not activists or involved in conflicts (23). What I attempt in this analysis is to offer these particular young people – most of whom are not activists, or involved in conflicts as their parents may have been - an opportunity "to be taken seriously, to engage in dialogue with adults and each other, and to have an appropriate degree of autonomy" (Thomas 2010, 188) and to use the outcome to allow them to create their own agenda for constructing their relationships to their countries or larger geopolitical regions

This study

The chapter is based on a one-person study I made, with the assistance and support of a great many people in these countries and the UK, for which I am grateful[i]. I worked with young people between 11 and 19 years old, in fifteen different countries in Europe [the whole study also included countries that are candidates for joining the European Union – Turkey, Iceland and Macedonia, and Cyprus] (Ross 2015). I carried out focus groups in several locations in each country between January 2010 and October 2012, visiting cities and towns in which I had colleagues willing to assist me. In each location in each country I usually visited two schools, trying to select those with different socio-economic intakes: this was the most efficient way to access groups of approximately the same age. In each school there were two groups of approximately six students. My aim was to include young *residents* of each country, not necessarily citizens, and I tried to include some young people from significant

minority groups. Table 1 shows the numbers of locations, schools, focus groups and students in the study.

[TABLE 1 here]

This was not a representative sample of young people, but a convenience sample of the range of potential views across each country: from different regions within the country, different social backgrounds and different cultural groups. Consent was obtained from the schools, parents and the young people themselves, and all data has been made anonymous. Most interviews were in English: where the young peoples were not able to do this a native-speaking colleague translated (an academic acquainted with issues of citizenship and identity who was not known to the young people). In the English-language interviews this colleague supported the young people when needed. Discussions were transcribed and examined and systematically analyzed against a country-specific index of themes built partly on the Bruter and Fulbrook studies (above), partly on country-specific literature, and partly on the groups' specific narratives. These country-analyses were then combined into a meta-analysis (Rabiee 2004, 657).

Identities are open to change, because their origin lies in communal exchanges. They are constantly reconstituted through shared understandings and discursive explorations with others (Shotter and Gergen, 1989; Burr 1995). This chapter explores some of the discursive practices employed in young people's talk about identity. Burr observes that "our ways of understanding the world come not from objective reality but from people, both past and present" (Burr 1996, 7). The young people in these groups negotiate meanings between themselves using their previous social experiences, each other's observation, and my questions and probing.

I used focus group discussions to allow participants to collaboratively construct their views and position themselves in discourses, and as my principal data source (Krueger and Casey 2009). These were not a series of semi-structured interviews, but discussions between members into which I introduced issues on which to focus (Hess 2009). I phrased to indicate that I did not know what the answer might be. I acted as a naïve foreigner asking for explanations of the self-evident. My participation kept conversations flowing with requests for clarification and occasionally drawing out apparent contradictions or changes in a participant's position. I did not intend to challenge points of views, but rather was aiming to elicit more conversations.

My opening questions were designed to put everyone at ease: I accepted all responses as valid, welcome and useful, and ensured that everyone spoke. I then focused on aspects of location: were they all from the same country? Those from other countries were asked how they felt about their country of origin and their country of residence. I spoke of 'the country', not of the state or the nation. I sometimes contrasted answers from different people to prompt debate. Asking how the young people thought their parents and grandparents thought about these issues allowed the opportunity to compare themselves with earlier generations. Some responded literally about their own families, others talked more generally about older people. I invited comments on social and regional differences, and possible minorities.

The contexts of these discussions inevitably affected their nature and content. Each focus group was heterogeneous and served as an audience for itself and for a stranger, enacting a specific and unique set of identities through the discourses invoked. The data generated in this project is the consequence of particularities that

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are partially a reaction to the insertion of my identity(ies) (or what the group members constructed as my identities) into the group. It is their retort both to that act and to the expressed identities of the other group members. By working with several groups (within schools, locations, and countries) I have attempted to crystallize my data through multiple reflections or iterations, but I, as the interlocutor in each situation, remained the same (but not necessarily constant) participant. Examining the social construction of identities can only be attempted in a social context, and social contexts cannot be reproduced (Shotter 1990). The counterpoint to this is that it now becomes my subjectivities that seek to interpret the 'meaning' of their discourses. Having taken up a particular position as my own, I inevitably see the world from the vantage point of that particular position, in terms of the particular images and metaphors relevant within particular discursive practices (Davies and Harré 1990).

As mentioned earlier, the discourses were systematically analyzed against a country-specific index of themes built partly on the Bruter and Fulbrook studies (above), on examples of expressions of feelings of agency, or lack of this (Katz 2008), and partly on country-specific literature.

Constructions of the nation

One very common expression of national identity was reference to pride in the history and cultural practices that were thought to be unique to the country. Several young people referred to how they had become aware of having a particular culture. A Czech young woman, Milenka (♀14) described making a study visit to Denmark: "it was the moment when I discovered what it was to be Czech … only then did I realize what it meant to me, to be Czech, to have traditions." Cultural specifics were often seen as the significant differentiators between European

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countries: Olesia from Kraków (♀12) said "we are not different when you think about rights, but we are different if you think about culture. We have different music, different songs … [our] own language." Rostek (16♂) in Warszawa linked Polish culture to the motto *Bóg, Honor, Ojczyzna* [God, honor and fatherland] - "many people identify themselves with these values", going on to argue that while the current liberalization in Poland seemed to diminish Poland's historical experience "we should find a centre between these two different visions". In Presov (Slovakia) a group of 12 year olds competed to list attributes: "dances", "handcrafts", "cooking - national dishes and food", "language - all Slovaks have language in common".

Others cited national literature and music, writers and composers as evidence of their culture, and spoke with detail and verve about their distinctive contribution, often linking this to the development of nineteenth century romantic nationalism. These positive cultural markers were strongly foregrounded in most of the discourses about why they identified with the country, and there were, in the conversations about the country *per se* very few references to civic institutions such as parliament, presidents or flags.

There were a significant number of expressions of internationalism, of a desire to make as little as possible national differences. In Poland, Patrycja (♀18) argued, "now for young people [it] isn't so important that we are Polish - we'd rather say that we are western European Union". Tomasz (♂17) described himself as "a citizen of the world, not just of Europe, but of the world." But some saw these changes as a threat, globalization potentially attacking the country's distinctive values. In Białystok, Ida (♀18) reflected "we have a great culture, and we are proud of it - but nowadays … we maybe don't have much difference between many countries."

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References to the country's politicians were nearly always negative. In the Baltic states they were seen as argumentative and not competent: Hillar (♂16) said "they fight each other. They don't agree on important decisions - they are like children [laughter]. Always fighting …Estonian politicians seem to be a bit stupid". A common theme in many countries was that politicians were self-seeking and sought to personally benefit from office. This was seen as endemic in Slovakia by Bohuslav (♂14) as he argued, "if you go to other countries everything is clean, and [here] the politicians grab everything… we have nothing, everything is corrupt". Such a perception was found in many countries - their own national politicians were thought to be more venal than those of other countries. In Bulgaria, Todor (14♂) claimed politicians "lie to people [to get elected] …they care only for themselves when they get power".

Many young people were critical of their compatriots, particularly about the way that they engaged in civic activities. For example, Małgorzata (♀ 16) pointed out that though many Poles disliked the government, "they don't bother to go to the elections to do anything about it. Poles are passive about politicians' activities". There were similar charges of electoral apathy in Bulgaria. In a heated discussion, Nikola (♂16) said "in some countries when the Government makes a change which is not liked by the people - they stand up and protest about that change …but whatever our government changes, we just say 'OK' … 'Oh, it doesn't matter'. I think we should stand up and fight for our rights".

In the former Yugoslav states and Bulgaria in particular some young people tended to describe their position as liminal on the threshold of Europe, but not within it. This was sometimes expressed in spatial terms referring to Europe as situated to the North-West and the Balkans to the South-East, themselves on the border. At other

times liminality was related to temporality, such as the phrase 'not yet European' was used quite often – it was a condition yet to be achieved.

This negative portrayal of civic leaders of the country in relation to politicians, and to the political behavior of some citizens was strikingly different from the stress on cultural affiliations that were so prominent in the great majority of the focus groups. Bruter's (2005) civic-cultural perspectives seem to be an appropriate analytic framework to characterize constructions of identification with the country (the 'nation' being rarely referred to). There was a strong and positive stress on culture, history, language and traditions as features of their affiliation with the country, and a much more negative portrayal of the country's civic institutions, a striking reversal of the way in which Bruter described European identities.

However, when the focus group moved on to discuss the potential for also having a European identity, Bruter's analysis was confirmed. A European Union identity was strongly linked to the institutions and civic practices of the Union (mobility, schemes for study opportunities, economic support through trade and regional support, and the promotion of human rights), and the possibilities of a cultural identity across Europe were generally dismissed (see Ross 2015 for a more extensive analysis of this). But when the focus groups moved on to discuss the hypothetical enlargement of the European Union to include countries, such as Belarus or Russia, then many young people objected strongly on the grounds of what they perceived as a lack of democracy and respect for human rights in those states – and at this point, contrasting them with the civic *virtues* of their own countries. To give some brief examples of this: in Estonia, Imre (♂15) referred to Russia as "not a very democratic country … [here we] make sure that human rights are protected", and in Poland Onufrius (♂15) said Russia was "deep in communist times - they have fewer

rights and freedoms than in Europe." In South-East Europe attitudes to Russian membership varied. Bulgaria and Serbia historically had strong positive connections with Russia, and the view that Russia was a champion or protector of the Serbs colored the views of the Slovenians and Croatians against Russian. In Romania Cristian (♂16), having denounced his country's political institution as corrupt, then contrasted it with Russia stated: "we try to be sort of politically correct here, and they don't really - they have … a history, a habit, of exploiting underdeveloped countries."

Viewing the possibility of other states as potential partners threw up different orientations of their own country. Othering states with a different political order, with different civic cultures and values, led them to see their own countries in a somewhat different light. When asked to consider their own country in isolation, it was constructed in cultural terms, and the country's political institutions were downplayed - sometimes with savage criticism. When filtered through the lens of potential partnership with some other states, their own country became constructed as political, and civic virtues were paraded to demonstrate difference. Both of Bruter's (2005) perspectives, the civic and the cultural are used contingently as the conversations move between the use of different lenses.

Constructing a generational narrative

As discussions progressed from initial protestations of familial affection and continuity, a sense emerged that participants' identities were different from those of their parents and grandparents. Most young people described parental views as rooted in past history, which helped explain their parents' identities and preoccupations but were not considered as very relevant to their own identities, their present or futures. The discussion by a group in Warszawa (Warsaw) that follows illustrates this.

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In April 2010 Russia invited a delegation of Polish politicians and military leaders to a memorial for the Katyn massacre of 1940. The airplane taking the Polish president and others crashed as it landed, and all 96 on board died. Polish society was devastated, and a memorial cross was erected outside the Presidential palace in Warszawa. When the president asked for this to be moved to emphasize the separation of state and church, there were protests from the 'defenders of the cross'. There were clashes with the police and then with the young supporters of a counter-movement who argued that Poland was secular (BBC 2010; Leszczynski 2011).

In November 2010, I spoke with a group of 15 and 16 year olds in a central Warszawa *Gimnazjum* (high school) a couple of kilometers from the Presidential Palace:

Lech	… I think that there's false patriotism in Poland, a false concern with politics - however, if a nation unites during catastrophes, like the Smolensk catastrophe, when one could sense an explosion of Polishness, and for a moment the nation unites, and the arguments don't matter for a moment, for a while - show-off patriotism. I have never met a real patriot... The majority of my friends and people I know aren't, because we don't have major national problems, national issues. My friends are not concerned with national identity … The older generation from the times of communism, when Poland was not wholly independent - back then this was necessary to free Poland - now, we don't have this problem….
Sergiusz	There's a huge difference between the older and the younger generations. The patriotism of older people has developed into egoism. This is changing, but we can still see this in small towns - and the patriotism of older people isn't a good patriotism. We can say that older people feel like Poles, but younger people feel less citizens of Poland and more citizens of Europe. They are more like Europeans, they are more open to other people from different countries.
Kinga	The younger generation doesn't care if it's Polish or something else - it doesn't feel a bond with the nation. The older people who fought for our independence feel more strongly the statement 'I am a Pole'… When they put the cross before the presidential palace, the older generation was very pro putting a monument there, to commemorate the deaths, and they wanted the accident to be remembered, and the younger generation just stood there for fun, just to watch the whole cross affair, and to see these people.

Lech begins by talking of "false patriotism", and then concedes there could be moments of national catastrophe, such as the Smolensk crash, that created feelings of national unity. But the younger generation was not patriotic, he argued, and did not need to be. Echoing Fulbrook (2011), he argued that "the older generation from the time of communism" justifiably needed to be patriots "to save Poland", and that "they" thought it should not be forgotten. He articulated an opposing discourse with "friends and people that I know" that disagreed with the views of his parents. Sergiusz picked up also intergenerational differences. Older people were egotistical, conservative, and did not show "good" patriotism. Younger people were less Polish and more European. Kinga supports this with her analysis of how the different generations behaved in the affair of the cross.

Many young people saw their parents and grandparents as locked into a view of the country that was conditioned by histories of struggle and resistance that were no longer so relevant. Parents and grandparents were described, fairly consistently, as being more patriotic and as having a greater attachment to the country than their own generation. These young people were not generally disrespectful of their parents' position, but argued that conditions now were different for themselves and for their futures. Given the lens of generational change, their constructions of their country seemed to shift. They defined the differences between their views and their parents' views of the country less in terms of cultural identification, and more in terms of historical perceptions of the changes in the nation and national identity.

In the various narratives I collected, the construction of difference from the older generations was striking, sometimes almost with a sense of loss: "now we don't feel the necessity of solidarity so much," explained Jolánka (♀15) in Hungary.

Gosia's (♀17) account is full of references to grandparents and parents positioning

them in a binary of 'they' and her own generation as 'we':

> maybe not our parents, but our grandparents feel the most Polish, because they
> or their parents were fighting for Poland in the wars … my grandma and my
> grandfather … tell me about the wars and how they lived - how it was hard,
> and how Russians came to my grandfather's house and stole everything. I
> think because of these moments in history they feel the most Polish …. We've
> got an easier life - we can't really understand how hard it was for these people.

The notion of a cohort - meaning those born within a particular period of time,

rather than a particular year - is a useful analytic tool with which to examine the

different experiences and societal constructs of different age groups. The concept of

generation was used by Fulbrook (2011) to characterize "the differential impact of the

times people live through and the significance of the 'social age' at time of particular

historical contexts and developments" (2011: 9). Many of the young people in this

study stress that they saw themselves as *politically* a different generation, and

attributed this difference to the changed 'social age' and political context. Many of

them said that they were thinking of how they might act to safeguard their futures,

some by participating in socio-political processes, which will be considered in the

following section, others by taking the opportunity to migrate, permanently or

temporarily. They were, as Katz observed, "subjects and social actors in their own

right" (2008:9),

Power and Agency

Running through many of these discussions about the faults of national

society were discourses of power and powerlessness. Some of these young people felt

dispossessed, lacking any sense of agency or ability to influence the system. For

example, in Latvia, although Klinta (♀15) was able to say "I feel satisfied with my

country", she went on "we cannot change what is happening. We cannot change the

future of Latvia". In Romania, there was sometimes debate about whether political activity was possible, as in this exchange in București:

Olga (♀16)   - we don't have the power to change. We've tried to change the President and our parents to vote for someone else - but it's still the same - men want power, and when they have it, they make use of it.

Mihai (♂15)   I'm sorry, but we are the people - we have the power - we are democratic, so the power should be with the people.

Most young people were broadly optimistic, professing faith in the future development of their country, sentiments sometimes tinged with expressions of powerlessness but mostly affirmative. Many were like Ivana (♀17) in Bulgaria, who suggests that emigration is a selfish solution: "if you go abroad, you will not change anything". Migration was a contested issue in almost every country, and offered yet another lens through which to define identity connected to one's country. Borislav (♂16) argued that there were two types of people: "people who want to leave, who don't want to live here and think that if they go abroad they will have a better life, and people who are proud of being Bulgarian, who love the country and want to stay". The thought of leaving a country produced in some an urge to talk about their attachment to the country.

This focus on the cultural rather than the civic, coupled with the respective positive and negative attitudes towards each, created a quandary for those who felt that they possessed agency or at least that they could contribute to the control of civic structures and political processes (Ross 2014). Could they - or should they - attempt to achieve the necessary solidarity to challenge systems that they felt to be inefficient or even corrupt when their allegiance to the country was primarily to its cultural practices, rather than its civic institutions? A recent study has suggested that college students may be particularly sensitive to perceived violations of agency, such as

political corruption (Metcalfe et al 2010, 281). An exchange between a group of 16 year olds at a school in north-eastern Poland illustrates this:

Maria (♀)   You all say that this… should be changed so we'll be better, but are you able to say that in two years' time, when you're 18, you'll go to vote? Because many young people usually don't.
Dominik (♂)   Yes, of course. [does not sound very convinced]
Małgorzata (♀)   I can't tell, because now I could say yes I will, but then it could turn out that I won't.
Olgierd (♂)   The election itself is not the solution - what really counts is the willingness to change. Will you [Maria] stay here in Poland and try to change and make better what can be made better around us? Most young people will not - they'll choose an easier way and emigrate to the West. It takes real effort to try to change something knowing that you're alone … the willingness to change must really be ours and not of the one who's going to represent us. It's us who should want to change something in our country.

Maria and Olgierd appear to construct themselves as potentially agentic. She argues that at least they should participate in elections (she thinks most young people will not), while he says that real agency lies in staying in Poland and participating in change. Dominik's hesitancy, and Małgorzata's franker acknowledgment suggest that they, at least, feel less powerful. Emigration was for many a very real option made possible by their country's accession to the European Union in the few years before these discussions. The prospect of leaving, whether for the short or the long term, was vigorously discussed in many groups. Talking about these options required these young people, particularly those in their later teens, to concentrate on their relationship to the country in a more focused way with a greater sense of realism, than might otherwise have been the case.

There was a counter-narrative of individual self-interest, exemplified by Monta (♀15) in Latvia, who said (after a long discussion on this issue) "well, I think more about myself, not about the country. If we speak honestly, I think more about what *I* am going to do, what *I* need, and what *I* want - not about what the country needs, what will happen to our country". To some, this was unproblematic. In

Lithuania Aušra (♀15) argued "I am not only a Lithuanian, but I am also a European. It's great! It's easier to go abroad. I'm not planning to stay in Lithuania - the economic situation is not very good". This was a different sense of empowerment that reflects an individual, self-interested sense of being able to decide on one's future – in a way that had not been possible for their parents and grandparents at the same stage of their lives. Mitchell (2006) has noted that the expansion of the European Union in 2004 could be construed as a shift from a former policy of "upward harmonisation" to a "discipline of neo-liberalism" (2006: 395) that encouraged the development of flexible and mobile workers, and the constructions put forward by Monta and Aušra appear to underline the extent to which some young people have strategically used the possibility of movement to construct a sense of individual agency.

Conclusions

Participating young people discussed political issues in an articulate manner and with a high degree of cogency. Their comments were critical and relevant to their personal context, but were informed with knowledge about the history and politics of their countries and the European Union. Participants' views were different within each country and between countries. More significantly, participants asserted their identities in different ways depending whether they looked through the lens of their country or Europe.

Bruter's (2005) civic-cultural perspectives were evidenced in most accounts of participants' identification with their country. Positive cultural empathy contrasted with a range of dissatisfactions with civic structures. The strengths of their countries' political values became more evident (to some of them) when they considered some

neighboring states. The lens of the European Union also sometimes led to similar nuances. It was sometimes said that the country's civic structures had been positively supported by membership, though economic support, some said, offered opportunities for political corruption. This critique underpins the argument that youth in this study were informed about politics and political values and skillfully leveled their critiques on these grounds. Skelton's (2008, 2010) observations on the way that young people are able to construct commentaries on the social world about them are evident in the critical and informed remarks that they made, often focusing (as Jens 2004 noted) on global social themes.

Generational differences offered another lens through which to construct one's country. The events described by parents and grandparents – of the Second World War, of the communist period, or of the times of national independence were known of, but seen as part of a parental discourse that was necessary to the young people only to provide an other form of political engagement from which they can distance themselves. There was sympathy and understanding of parents and grandparents' patriotism, but also an expression of being part of a modern cohort or generation that no longer needs loyalty to one's country in the same form. Generally, their patriotism is constructed in terms of affection and gentle affinities, rather than of struggle and resistance. This appears to reflect Fulbrook's (2011) concept of generational dissonance following key political transitions, and contrasts with the hypothesis advanced by Leccardi and Feixa (2012) that young people in Eastern Europe construct their identities largely within the collective family memories of the communist period. These young people's perception of the older generations of their family appears to be that parents and grandparents are locked into a reaction to their experiences of those

times, and that the new generation that these young people belong to are able to dissociate themselves from these reactions.

Accession to the European Union created a very real dilemma for many young people. They were now able to migrate, temporarily or permanently, to other European countries with relatively little restriction. They argued that doing so would perhaps leave their country in a liminal, non-European status, but bring them personally social and economic advantages. Staying in their country they reckoned, to which many expressed strong cultural ties, might possibly advantage the country as a whole. Despite the often expressed frustrations with local politics, a number of participants felt they should stay. The neo-liberal labor flexibility within the enlarged EU (Mitchell 2006) gave these young people a very real sense of agency and an ability – even a need – to make decisions about the directions their lives could take (Skelton 2010).

This interviewed cohort of young people positioned themselves as politically very different to earlier generations. They are engaged with politics, sometimes through criticisms of local political practices, and at other times striving for political agency. They have, in a very real sense, a set of choices to make about their political identities. Moreover, they are aware of that not only do such choices exist but they are approaching the age when they will be able to make decisions.

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Table 1: number and location of informants in focus groups

Country	Locations (towns and cities)	*n* schools	*n* focus groups	*n* young people
Bulgaria	Blagoevgrad, Sofia, Veliko Tarnovo	6	11	72
Croatia	Rijeka, Zadar, Zagreb	6	11	68
Czech Republic	Hradec Králové, Ostrava	4	8	47
Estonia	Tallinn, Tartu, Luunja, Püünsi	4	8	44
Hungary	Budapest, Pécs, Szeged	6	10	64
Latvia	Jūrmala, Rēzekne, Riga	4	8	50
Lithuania	Elektrėnai, Kaunas, Vilnius	4	6	40
Macedonia	Prilep, Skopje, Tetovo	6	11	72
Poland	Białystok, Kraków, Olsztyn, Warszawa	9	16	96
Romania	Bucureşti, Iași, Oradea, Timișoara	10	16	105
Slovakia	Banská Bystrica, Prešov	3	7	42
Slovenia	Koper, Ljubljana, Novo Mesto, Prade	7	13	76
Total in this analysis		*69*	*125*	*776*
Other countries in study not included in this analysis				
Cyprus	Lapta, Larnaca, Lefkoşa, Nicosia	4	8	55
Iceland	Akureyri Reykjavík Selfoss	8	10	58
Turkey	Çanakkale Eskişehir İstanbul Tokat	15	16	85
		27	*34*	*198*