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## **Border Crossings: Young Peoples' Identities in a Time of Change 1 - The Baltic States and Turkey**

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### ***Abstract***

*This is the first of a projected series of five presentations from 2010 to 2014, based on the development of the project being undertaken under the aegis of the Jean Monnet Professorship. In the current academic year I have conducted a series of focus groups with pupils (some aged c 12 years old, some c 16 years old) and some of their teachers, in one country that is a Candidate for membership of the European Union (Turkey) and three countries that joined the Union six years ago (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). I was trying to establish the discourses these young people use to construct their sense of identities, particularly with reference to the idea of possibly holding a European identity, or not. The survey is deliberately small scale and discursive, trying to avoid the pre-construction of categories by the researchers, and attempting to make an analysis through 'one pair of eyes', using some forms of discourse analysis that have been adapted to be used in the context of a range of languages. This presentation of initial findings highlights some of thoughtful and insightful views young people in these countries have on their identities and futures. In subsequent years the study will be extended to further candidate countries and other countries that have fairly recently joined the Union, and by the development of analytic themes that will help us explore how young people variously engage with the development of their identities in the context of changing borders and boundaries in Europe.*

This paper describes the early stage of a small-scale qualitative investigation into how young people of secondary school age are constructing their personal identities and becoming aware of their actual or potential European citizenship. The study focuses on two groups of countries: the three European Union candidate states of Turkey, Croatia and FYR of Macedonia, and nine of the countries that have fairly recently joined the Union: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Czech Rep, Slovakia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria.

Social identities are increasingly recognised as being both multiple and constructed contingently within a context that includes the idea of Europe. Young people are developing identities that may include a range of intersecting dimensions, including gender, age, region and European. It appears that a growing number of young people in parts of the European Union are acknowledging an at least partial sense of European identity alongside their national identity: the degree to which this is acknowledged varies by nationality, gender and social class, as well as by age.

The study will eventually cover some thirty to thirty five different locations across these countries. In each of these, two or three schools with different social mixes are selected (about 80 schools), and in each school focus groups are conducted with two groups of

pupils – about five or six 12-13 year olds, and a similar group of 15 to 16 year olds. This will eventually be about 750 young people. Despite this number, it should be emphasised that this is not attempting a representative sample, but to identify the diversity of views expressed. The study is not concerned with legal nationality or status, but young people whose home is now in the country (so if there are significant minorities or migrants, these are included). The project also includes a few teachers in each school.

I carry out focus group discussions with each group. This involves getting the young people to discuss issues between them, rather than responding to questions as individuals. This should move towards identifying the discourses they use in talking about issues of culture, belonging and identity, rather than their simply response to an outsider's interrogation. The object is to identify their constructions, rather than have them respond to my constructions. I have obtained informed consent from the pupils, and in the case of those under 16, also from their parents. All quotations have been made anonymous.

I set out a small number of very general topics – how they define themselves, how they think this compares to other people in the country, and in how they think their views differ from those of their parents. If it has not been raised, I also ask them about the impact of being European, and what 'being a European' might mean. I generally conduct the session in their own language, and then immediately afterwards go through the recording with a colleague, recording a translation of the session. These I transcribe, and then use a free-coding system to identify themes, as the basis for analysis. Language is an issue: many of the words we use in these areas do not translate completely, or have shades of meaning that vary from country to country. I hope to address this in my discussions with colleagues, so that these can begin to be identified. Some of the older young people have sufficient skills and confidence to talk with me in English for most of the time, but I always work alongside someone who will help interpret more complex ideas and thoughts.

The particular approach of this project is that there is a sole researcher. This gives me a complete overview of the research process and the data, and also means that there is only one subjectivity interpreting the data and its meanings. I do not believe that objectivity is possible or meaningful in research of this nature, so by ensuring that all the data is collected and processed by a single pair of eyes (and a single pair of ears) means that it is all subject to the same degree of observer interpretation. I accept that positivists may see this as a weakness – but I see it as a strength.

### **Work so far**

Though I've described this as a small project, it's big for a single researcher. I plan the fieldwork to stretch over some 30 months – so far I have done less than a third. I have conducted a pilot study in a town in north east Poland, and then accomplished most of what I intend to do in the three Baltic states. I have done about 60% of what I intend to do in Turkey. So I am reporting here on my responses from about 200 individual young people, interviewed in 32 different groups.

### **Overall impressions**

A significant first impression has been how articulate and thoughtful nearly all the young people have been. They have, after some initial hesitations, generally become involved in serious debate, setting out ideas that reflect interest and reflection of these ideas. Many teachers have seemed surprised at this – and it is a second point that when I have afterwards asked the groups if they discuss these issues with their teachers, they nearly always say they have not. So perhaps it should not be unexpected that teachers are unaware of their views, and are indeed sometimes surprised that they have views. Many children also say that they rarely discuss these issues with their parents. It seems to me to be a missed opportunity that young people are not given proper opportunity and platforms to talk with adults about some of these important topics. It also became apparent to me that many young people have become inducted in their school into a question and answer process that assumes that questions are to test the knowledge of the person being questioned, not attempts to elicit their opinions, experiences and views. I was struck that many of these young people seemed grateful for an opportunity to give and talk about their values, and to simply listened to.

### **Turkey**

I begin with some observations about the Turkish pupils, although I have not yet collected all my data there. The Turkish data demonstrates how diverse young people's views can be, and I describe how the views in my three Turkish locations differed from each other.

The first location is a small provincial town, with a strong military history – the area is dotted with many large memorials and military cemeteries. This was reflected in the somewhat nationalist senses of Turkish identity that several expressed:

There are a lot of historical victories of the Turkish people, and they are known world-wide. And because of that, I always feel honoured to be a Turkish person. Adnan A (♂ 12¼).

The Turkish man is the person who can sacrifice their life for their country, and the woman is the supporter of her man. Kaan U (♂, 13¾)

Change – particularly the possibility of joining the European Union, was a potential threat to cultural and national hegemony:

Being a member of the European Union would create cultural damage to the Turkish identity. I think the European identity will force people to forget their Ottoman history and background. Bugra U (♂ 14)

We are losing our old pure Turkish. ....we get influenced by the others, we can say that we have different identities now ...I think it's completely about cultural imperialism ...in order to make us weak, the strong ones attack our culture and language so that they can break our unity. Adnan A (♂, 12¼)

In contrast to this, the second location was in a larger university city: some of the young people here were critical of what they saw as an oppressive culture and society, that was in their view too closely linked to religion.

We cannot declare our opinion in society very freely. People seem like sheep – they move together, and we all follow the flock. This is common throughout society today. Agah G (17½ ♂)

Our culture has got so attached to religion. ‘Oh, she’s a Turk, she’s a Muslim’.  
Irem O (♂ 16¾)

In Istanbul I was able to talk with slightly older young people, of working-class Kurdish, Alevi and Turkish backgrounds, in the suburbs/*banlieu* of Istanbul. They were school failures, now participating in cooperative basic education activities. They showed sophisticated ways of dealing with ‘identity’ issues.

My family describe themselves as Kurdish and *Şafi* as a branch of religion ... I don’t try and separate these identities from others, and I’m not saying *Suni* are different, I don’t describe people this way. I think it’s enough to be human.  
Muharrem I (19♂)

I think it would not be true to describe myself with only one word. What can I say? Should I say I am Turk, Kurdish, or should I say I am Alevi, or should I say I am this or that? I think it’s not true to say about myself that I am only one thing. And about my differences? I think everyone has differences and similarities ... and everyone has some things which they think are top of the list, that they are working for, even fighting for. Of course, I have something like that, but I don’t believe that I need to describe myself with only one thing.  
Vasif G (17¼ ♂)

They had very mixed views on Europe, as the following lively (but good-tempered) discussion demonstrates.

[on joining the EU] There are ... advantages and disadvantages. ... you will miss your country if you are in Europe. The advantages, the education, the health system -there’s an advantage for everything in Europe, if you’re from Turkey. Aslihan T (♂ 18, Kurdish Alevi)

I think so, I think Europe is somewhere very advantageous, especially in the education system. They have a very good education system – everyone can go to school ..... Yasin K (♂ 18, Kurdish Alevi)

Well, I don’t think so. If you go to Paris ... you can see chaos [and] ... conflict, because there is ... inequality ... Sinan T (♂ 18, Kurdish Alevi)

But I think the Human Rights are more important in Europe. They have a better education system ... it’s for free! In Germany anyone can go to university.  
Sevda K (♂ 18, Kurdish Alevi)

Comparing European and Turkish cultures, I think that the Turkish people are more active in terms of showing their anger against inequality ... there is no solidarity in Europe. Sinan T (♂ 18, Kurdish Alevi)

But I think Turkey is not very innocent in these things. Because people act badly to each other in Turkey. Turkish to Turkish, Muslim to Muslim. Aslihan T (♂ 18, Kurdish Alevi)

### The Baltic countries

There were similarities and differences between the views of the young people in the Baltic states. What they have in common is that they are the first generation of young people born into these three independent states since 1940. Their parents were socialised within the Soviet Union – and these parents may be Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian – but also Russian, Belorussian, Polish, Ukrainian, Tartar, or any combination of these. All three countries have substantial minorities with a unique status. Not all the minorities have applied for, or have not been granted, citizenship of the newly-revived states, and there are various tensions around the roles adults played, or were presumed to have played, in the times up to 1989. This pie chart of the population of Latvia in 2009 shows some of the issues: some ‘Russians’ have acquired citizenship, some have not.



The Latvian population has 60% of Latvian ethnicity, the Estonian some 69%, and the Lithuanian 83%. Non-citizens may have very little use of the local Baltic language; many more continue to speak Russian at home, and there are in all three countries schools in which the principal medium of instruction is Russian. Of the twelve schools I visited, three were Russian language schools, and in several of the other schools I included in the groups pupils of Russian and other origin, or part-origin.

So in the Baltic states we have newly-revived national feelings of independence, coupled with many residents who originated from a state that had, from their perspective (and that of the ECHR and the EU), invaded and occupied their country. What do young people take of this history in constructing their and their fellow-students' identities?

The following part of the paper divides the Baltic responses into country-based sections, but many of the findings were very similar for all three countries. These observations are

given with evidence from a particular country, but very often similar evidence could have been found in the other two countries.

### **Lithuania**

The young people I spoke with – of all ethnic backgrounds - nearly all showed a sense of pride in their Lithuanian identity.

I'm proud of being Lithuanian and everybody [here is] I think. [It is ] surprising that we survived for a long time, and we were a small nation, and we have our own language, our own traditions and it's amazing to be in the Europe, and to be so small a nation. (Skaiste P, Ő 15¼)

But many young people also expressed a sense of change in the meaning of being Lithuanian. They were, they thought, less patriotic than their parents, and globalisation and EU membership were changing aspects of the culture.

When we were trying to get our freedom and independence, and there was more fighting for our freedom, we talked about it more - now we are talking less and less about our citizenship. (Vaiva S, Ő 17)

My parents are more patriotic than I am. I am more a person of the world. (Laura A, Ő 16¾)

other cultures are coming to Lithuania and ... our cultures and traditions are getting a little less important to people. (Edgaras F, Ő 15½)

Some thought that Lithuanians had a negative image in Europe, and that many people did not know where the country was.

If other countries hear anything about Lithuania, they hear bad things, not good ones. (Migle A, Ő 15¾)

Other countries really don't know where Lithuania is. (Grinvydas A, Ő 15¼)

There were also widespread fears about the decline in population, from both a falling birthrate and from emigration. This was also true in the other Baltic countries.

Many young people I spoke with who were of Russian origin asserted with various degrees of strength that they regarded themselves as Lithuanian.

Well, I wouldn't identify myself as a 100% Lithuanian, because I'm not. Only one-fifth of my blood is Lithuanian. The other parts are from Poland, Russia, Ukraine and even Georgia. So I couldn't say that I'm absolutely Lithuanian. But, because I'm living here, and I'm feeling a little patriotic, I think I could identify myself as a Lithuanian. (Tadas K, Ő 16)

I can describe myself at 100% Lithuanian, because half of my blood is from Russia .... my dad is from Russia, and .. my mother is Lithuanian and I was born here ... so that I can say that I'm Lithuanian, for sure. I think my parents think of themselves as Lithuanian, because they lived here when the whole thing ... when the soldiers tried to take the TV tower. [Some others] are not so tolerant - they still remember ... and have bad memories and reactions to other nationalities. (Edgaras F, ♂ 15½)

The evidence I had was that many young ethnic Lithuanians largely accepted this.

I think Russians are different, like the Lithuanians. There are some friendly Russian people, there are some unfriendly. We've just had [a bad] opinion from the old times, when they were trying to occupy our country – so we still think that they are unfriendly, though it was a long time ago. (Valentina N, ♀ 11¾)

But there were more critical views, and some resented the (relatively small) number of ethnic Russians who had made no attempt to learn the Lithuanian language.

I think that the differences between Russians and Lithuanian are traditions, manners, culture, citizenship. A lot of Russian people are very *svetingas* [hospitable]. But there are some of them who are really *grubus* [crude] and *įžūlus* [abrasive]. You can't expect anything good from them! (Jovita B, ♀ 15½)

Membership of the EU was regarded positively, and many particularly noted the lack of travel restrictions, giving them new opportunities, not just for work, but also for travel and study.

There is no big difference - It's great – I am not only a Lithuanian, but I am also a European. It's great! (Ausra K, ♀ 15¼)

Geographically, we are in Europe, so naturally we feel European, because we are part of it. Also ... the euro, and the freedom to move from one country to another. We don't feel patriotic, because we emigrate to other countries. (Vaiva S, ♀ 17)

## Latvia

Many young Latvians also expressed the view that Latvian culture was at some risk, and that depopulation from emigration was a threat. Many also expressed some determination in doing something about this.



I would like to work more somewhere abroad - to find a good job here is not that easy. Besides, there are more opportunities to get education there, abroad.  
Ansataija Z (Ķ 13 ½)

We have to try to save Latvian traditions, we have to speak Latvian, and we have to make the population grow – get more babies born. ... My dad has got a different view – I am a patriotic Latvian, but he doesn't feel the same way.  
(Zanete D, Ķ 13¼)

We are the next generation – if we all go away, then who will stay – we are responsible for our future. (Uldis F, ♂ 17)

Estonia needs us more than other countries. (Kaspar R, ♂ 16)  
Latvia, like Lithuania, was small country in a state of flux.

We are like a little island, somewhere in the ocean, moving to the land, closer and closer every year. The next generation will be more open minded and active. (Monta A, Ķ 15½)

A group of ethnic Latvian pupils discussed what determined nationality, and appeared to conclude that it was cultural, rather than simply by descent: "It's not the blood that makes your nationality" (Nellija G, Ķ 14¾); "it's more what's in your head" (Monta A, Ķ 15 ½), "and what you see every day - if you are Russian, but you live in Latvia, you don't know how the Russians live in Russia, so – so you become Latvian" (Agnese K, Ķ 16).

I spoke with some Russian ethnic-origin young people whose personal accounts showed this ability to have a multiple sense of nationality. They were clearly accepted and liked by their Lithuanian classmates.

I am Russian – I am born in Latvia, and I feel like a Latvian. I speak pretty good Latvian, my friends are Latvian, and my dad is Latvian. I don't feel I am Russian. (Matiss K, ♂ 13¼)

I'm not a total Latvian, I'm only partial. On my mother's side, everyone was Latvian, but on my father's side there is a very mixed line: there are Russian, Belorussians, even from Poland descent. I kind of respect both – I am a patriot of more countries than just one. (Reines F, ♂ 17¾)

But I also spoke to other Russian-origin young people – in the Russian medium schools – who felt more confused and rootless about their national identity.

I feel neither Russian or Latvian, I feel like neither, like a nobody. (Valentina B, Ķ 13¼)

I am neither Russian nor Latvian. With my soul I am here in Latvia, but at the same time I like Russian culture and Cossack culture very much. I respect the Latvian culture. (Ansataija Z, ♂ 13½)

I feel myself Russian. I live in Latvia. And I feel completely Russian. (Darja S, ♂ 13)

It should also be pointed out that many of these young people were not, by descent, anything like 'pure' Russian, but very often had very mixed genealogies.

I am Russian, because I know that my ancestors were Russian, and I know that they came to Latvia only a few generations ago. ... I think that I show signs of other cultures ... speaking about bloodline. I am not purely Russian. I have Polish and Tartar ancestry. So I also show signs of these cultures. Besides, I am also a Muslim ... On my mother's side, they are all of Tartar ancestry, and they don't really feel they are Russians – they tried to follow their traditions. But since we came here to Latvia it is now harder, and to simplify it all – we consider ourselves part of Russian culture. Besides, my mother is not very devoted to her Tartar ancestry, she is more in her Russian ancestry which came from her father. And recently my mother has re-awakened her patriotism in Latvia – in recent times she is very respectful of Latvia. My father, he is Polish, but as I said, well, to simplify it all, we all consider ourselves Russians. (Dmitrij P, ♂ 16½)

Many young people like Dmitrij – with Latvian passports, but not Latvian nationality, felt under threat and oppressed by the Latvian state, and were identifying themselves as Russian almost as a 'flag of convenience', as a label that identifies them as being the other.

Engagement in different cultural activities and traditions also helped define national identity. Two Russian-origin pupils in the same town gave differing accounts: "we celebrate Russian holidays, Russian traditions, and that's why I feel myself as Russian" (Marina M, ♂ 12¾), and "we've lived in Latvia for so long we have taken up Latvian traditions – nearly all Russian people who live here celebrate Leiga ... so sometimes I feel myself to be Latvian" (Anton Z, ♂ 15).

Many young people of both Russian and Estonian ethnicity strongly expressed their disillusionment with the political process. "Politicians ... are fighting for their own share, for their pockets", said (Agnese S, ♀ 14½, Latvian). Some Russian-origin young people complained "Latvia doesn't have a future, - our industry is destroyed" (Marina M, ♂ 12¾), and that "Latvia [has] destroyed its industry ...and doesn't construct anything" (Mikhail A, ♂ 11½). A sense of powerlessness was apparent: "we cannot change what is happening: We cannot change the future of Latvia" (Klinta C, ♂ 15, Russian).

## **Estonia**

I began with military cemeteries in Turkey, and end with one in Tallinn. On my way to the airport home I was taken to visit the bronze memorial to the Russian – the Soviet – war dead, the bronze soldier who was moved in 2007 from the city centre to the suburban Cemetery of the Estonian Defence Forces. The move provoked violent reactions by some the Russian speakers, and adult native Estonians refer to this as *Pronksiöö* ‘Bronze Night’, what I take to be an attempt to link it to the *Kristallnacht* of 1938.

A substantial number of the ethnic Estonian young people I spoke with had some reservations about Russians in Estonia, expressed with various degrees of caution.

They have this kind of temperament. It’s already in their blood. They are very brave and courageous, and they can’t do anything about it. (Merilin T, ♀ 12½)

They are arrogant. (Daniel V, ♂ 12¼)

Most do learn the language, and they live here as Estonians: they don’t think of themselves as Russians. But of course, there are others. (Jaagkup K, ♂ 16½)

I think we are pretty special. We are calmer than other nations. I know Russians, for example, are passionate ... Imre T, ♂ 15¾)

Some ethnic Russians in a Russian-medium school felt slighted by these attitudes.

Sometimes I want to talk with Estonian boys and girls, but they just look at me like I’m not a normal girl, and don’t want to speak with me. Some people want to talk with me – but some don’t because I’m Russian. (Dina B, ♀ 14¾)

Some of these Russian-origin young people felt ambivalent about their national identities, while others were more assured, or had developed strategies and multiple identities that enabled them to cope.

I feel like I am a Russian in Estonia. (Dina B, ♀ 14¾)

I always say that I was born in Estonia, and I am Estonian – I am Russian, yes, but I feel that totally I am Estonian – I just speak Russian and Estonian, but Estonian’s not my best language ... (Liisu L, ♀ 14¾)

I feel that we’re Europeans, who are Russians, who can speak Russian and Estonian. (Maarika L, ♀ 14¾)

I don’t think I’m a real Estonian, but I have an Estonian passport. Yes, I was born in Estonia, but my parents are Russian, and my grandfather and grandmother are Russian too. So I think that I’m Russian, even if I go to England, for example, or Germany, I will be Russian. Bogdan H (♂ 16¾)

As in Latvia, the term ‘Russian’ is sometimes used as a convenience, and contingently.

I was in Croatia, and someone asked me where I was from – and I said in Estonia, and I saw from their eyes ‘Where is that?’ So it’s quite easy to say that you are from Russia, and they will understand quicker and there’ll be no problems with explanations. So I say I’m from Russia to avoid geographical explanations that ‘Estonian is situated west of Russia ...’ (Zhenya K, □ 16¾)

One young ‘Russian-origin’ young woman is worth quoting at length, to illustrate both the complexity of hers situation, and her ability to manage it with both humour and determination.

In my opinion nationality is not an important thing, because people move every day. For example, my grandparents lived in the Ukraine and in Russia, and the previous generation lived in Poland, and I don’t know where my ancient [ancestors] lived. Now I’m living in Estonia for all of my life, and my mother and father live here – but maybe sometime I will leave this country, and my children will live in another country – and what will they say they are? Estonian? or Russian? or French? I don’t know! ....

I think I’m European. Because I’m from Estonia and it’s Europe, and my grand-generations were from Russia and Ukraine, and it is also Europe – and I have a Europe passport – it’s not Estonian. There was some point [date] when it was given in Estonia, but actually every person in Europe has the same passport.

My father was born in Russia, and when he was only a year old his mother moved to Estonia. My mother’s parents lived in Ukraine for 20 years, and they were born there – but my mother was born in Estonia and I was born in Estonia. But ... my father says that he is Russian - he has an Estonian passport, but he says he’s Russian. My mother doesn’t have an Estonian passport – she says she’s Ukrainian. I have Russian blood and Ukrainian blood and I was born in Estonia, so this generations that lived abroad isn’t further from me. I can’t say that I am only Ukrainian, or I am only Estonian, or I am only Russian. So I am not so sure like them. So it’s different.

I don’t see my future in this country. I won’t study in Estonian Universities. My dream for a long time has been to study in England – I think it will be Scotland, or something like that. After that I won’t return to Estonia. I think I will live there in England – or move somewhere – possibly places like the USA, Australia or Germany – I don’t know exactly. And if I could, I would take my parents with me, because I love my family very much, and I want to live and see them every day.

If they won’t move - I won’t live in Estonia, because my grandparents left their native country, and the grand-grand generations did the same –and maybe Estonia is just a frontier zone, a stage in our life, and maybe future generations will live in Africa, and so on – I don’t know what will be the future! (Lada, □ 17¾)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These are collected together from various stages over the length of the focus group, and were not a continuous statement.

The young ethnic Estonians generally expressed a sense of national pride, though they were not in agreement about whether this was more or less than their parents' sense of patriotism.

My parents are not as patriotic as I am. I don't know why. They are patriots, but not as much as me. (Imre T, ♂ 15¾)

I think we care that we are not part of Russia any more, and we are free. Soviet times were very tough here. (Jaan K, ♂ 13¾)

I think [our parents were] prouder than we are, because they have been in the Baltic Chain, and they have fought for their country. (Liisi N, ♀ 13¾)

As in both other Baltic countries, migration and depopulation are a concern, and some young people thought that people should not leave Estonia for employment.

I think they shouldn't go – it's dangerous for the existence of Estonia. In Latvia there was a little town where many of its inhabitants left to work in Ireland – and they never returned. So the town stopped existing. (Marek Y, ♂ 16½)

European Union membership was viewed positively, as necessary to support a small state, economically and militarily.

Many small countries have become one, and unified: they support each other within the European Union. (Marek Y, ♂ 16½)

We have our ambassadors in the European Union, which means that our vote is part of these decisions, which wasn't so in the Soviet Union – they made the decisions and we had no say. So I do not see the European Union as loosing our independence – I see it as we [have] gained an ally, and a very powerful ally. And we can still make our decisions at the country level, we just have to follow the directives at the level of the European Union. (Jaagkup K, ♂ 16½)

### **Not a conclusion**

This has been an all too brief summary of the very diverse and thoughtful comments of two hundred young people. I shall be, in due course, providing much fuller and more elaborate findings: this has just been a first scratch at the surface of a very rich and fertile field of data.

European integration depends on the development of a shared construction of at least some elements of Europe, and this is particularly true of these particular young people. It may be a shared conception of a Europe of differences, or a conception of the Europe as seeing its fractured past as 'the other', or of an emergent shared youth culture.

Understanding how new young Europeans construct their idea of Europe, their role in it, and what it means to be European should be of value and importance to a very wide audience.