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“Am I European?” - The cognitive and emotional aspects of Hungarian and Romanian adolescents’ European identities

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Abstract

This paper addresses the topic of European and national identities, in the context of European Union, considered as a multi-national society. The problem raised by the situation of multiple memberships at subgroups and superordinate levels is the persons’ representation of the relationship between these identities in terms of opposition, independence, or positive correlation, and the position towards the integration in a superordinate category. Our research investigates the attitudes of two samples of 100 Hungarian and 100 Romanian adolescents towards their memberships of the European Union. The participants in both samples were high school students, aged between 16-17 years old. All of them were nationals of their country, and had both parents of the same origin and nationality. The emotional aspect of attitudes concerning European and national membership were investigated using Semantic Selection Test (De’Escury, 2008; Szabó, 2010) and the cognitive and behavioral components of these attitudes were explored by a questionnaire focusing on the perceived consequences of their country’s European integration. The questionnaire was designed by the authors, based on the results of previous studies in the field (Bruter, 2005; Chryssochoou, 2000, Eurobarometer). The results suggest that the adolescents emphasized the economic advantages of the European integration, and also the freedom to travel, study and work abroad. The preservation of some specific aspects of national identity was a source of concern, also the problem of the national group’s status within the superordinate group. The results are discussed in relation to the findings of the previous studies in the field.

Keywords: *European Integration; national identity; superordinate groups; adolescence*

Introduction

Identity is a key-term in education and social sciences, employed for a wide range of purposes, considered by many specialists as an umbrella concept related to self-understanding, to the meaning that one attaches to oneself.

The process of identity development is enormously complex, taking place through the entire individual’s life. Adolescence is considered a crucial period for identity formation because for the first time different aspects of development – physical, cognitive, emotional and social – reach to a point in which the person has the ability to organise the former identifications in a synthesis which constitutes a ‘viable path toward adult

maturity' (Simons, Kalichman and Santrock, 1994, p. 76). Starting from the psychosocial developmental theory proposed by Erikson (1965), Marcia (1967) proposed the different statuses of identity, based on the extent of the crisis and commitment experienced by the adolescents, illustrating the fact that the process takes place gradually. Adolescence is a period in which the individuals are confronted with a range of alternatives for the future life trajectory, and the adolescent is expected to engage in an exploration of these alternatives, in order to understand which of them are meaningful for her/him. Nevertheless, at least at the end of this period a decision is expected to be taken, a personal investment in what is important for the person from her/his future psychological and social evolution. Identity diffusion characterised the adolescents who have not experienced the sense of a crisis regarding identity, who have not yet raised the problem of the possible alternatives and of the commitment in what they were going to do. Another status of identity is the foreclosure, a situation in which a commitment was made without experiencing a crisis, but mainly based on the influence exerted by other persons adolescents invested with importance and authority. Identity moratorium refers to the case of the adolescents who are in the middle of a crisis, who have recognised the options and are engaged in their active exploration, but the commitment is absent or vague, the decision regarding the important aspects for the development in the future being postponed. Identity achievement is the term which describes the persons who have experienced the crisis, who have undergone the process of searching for meaningful alternatives, and who have made a personal investment, a commitment, answering to the important questions 'Who am I?' and 'Who am I to be?'

According to the frame proposed by the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981) and the Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987) identity is shaped not only by our personal characteristics, idiosyncratic traits, which permit the interpersonal differentiation and a sense of being unique, but also by the perceived membership to certain groups. People have the tendency to assign themselves and others to specific social categories, gaining an internalized group membership, together with the value and emotional significance attached to it. This important part of the self-concept allows the specialists to understand the process of individuals' subjectivity construal and also explain the group behaviour (Hopkins and Reicher, 2011). The idea of social identity also raises the question of the relationship between different categories in which the persons consider to be part of. Related to this topic, specialists address the issue of recategorization, in order to study the processes of development of a new representation encompassing different subgroups.

An important category for collective identity is nationality and ethnicity. Especially in the Eastern Europe, a persons 'inherited a long ethnic tradition that had a single aim, to put in place the romantic idea of a single people, a single language and a single state' (Dragoman, 2008, p. 74). After joining the European Union, the interest of the specialists is focused on the relation between national and European identity. Within this context

European Union could represent for its members a super-ordinate category, a more inclusive aggregate, transcending beyond the national identity. In fact, the European Union was established based on several “group beliefs”, including the idea of a new sense of the self (Chryssochoou, 2000), its principles being, among others:

- to deepen the unity between the countries, respecting at the same time the culture and traditions of their people,
- to facilitate the free movement of persons,
- to establish a citizenship common to nationals of the countries.

In Romania, which became a full member of the European Union in 2007, there was a great public interest and enthusiasm in the European integration, but the population had no information about the costs, neither material nor of symbolic nature. In Hungary, the sceptic attitudes were manifested early: in 2003 in the popular voting 16.24% of the participants said ‘no’ to the European integration. Within this context our research investigates the attitudes toward the EU membership of two samples of adolescents belonging to two different nationalities – Hungarian and Romanian, and the relation between national and European identity.

Method

We used the complex survey method to explore the emotional and cognitive aspects of attitudes towards the home Country and European Union. In the first part of the questionnaire we used the Semantic Selection Test to investigate the emotional aspect of attitudes concerning European and national membership. The Semantic Selection Test is a relatively new method developed by Thomas Urbanek. Originally, they used it to explore semantic concepts of individuals (Filip, M., & Urbánek, T., 2006). Further researches demonstrate the face validity (d’Escury, Gajodosjova, Beunje, 2008) and construction validity of the test in the exploration of group ideas and feelings as well (Szabó, 2010/a/b/c)

The SST is a semi-projected test. The participants have to choose eight pictures out of 16 pictures (see Fig.1.) which they feel most related to a given concept (or word).

Figure 1: Pictures of The Semantic Selection Test



The strength of semantic correspondence of two words is counted from the cases when the subjects choose the same picture related to two difference words. In this study we used two target words: Home Country: Hungary/Romania (HC) and European Union (EU) and five reference words (emotions) freedom, love, security, happiness and fear.

The second part of the survey is a structured questionnaire designed by the authors, based on the results of previous studies in the field (Bruter, 2005; Chryssochoou, 2000, Eurobarometer), focusing on the personal meanings and the perceived consequences of their country's European integration. At the end of the questionnaire there is an explicit identity related question.

Participants and procedure

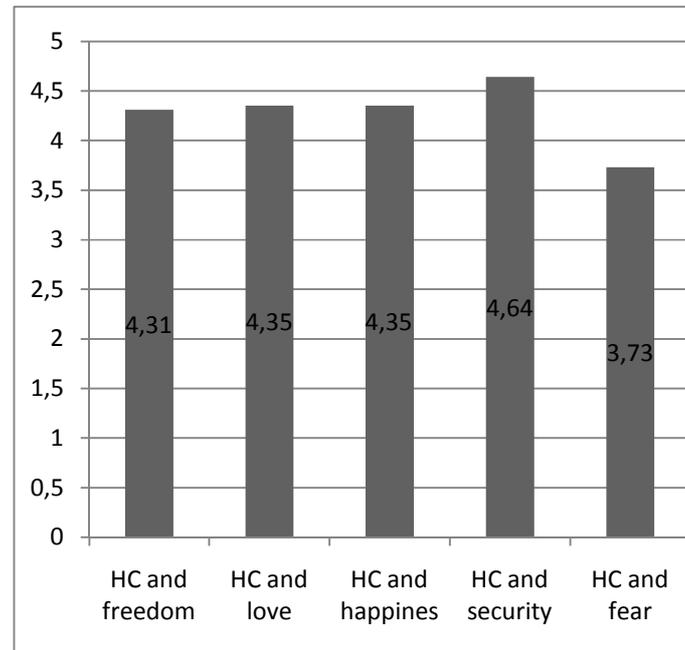
111 Hungarian (N= 35 male; N= 76 female) and 100 Romanian adolescents (N= 38 male; N= 62 female) aged 16 -17 years (Mean= 16,35 ; SD= 0,56), recruited from public high-schools in Szeged and Oradea. All of them were nationals of their country, and had both parents of the same origin and nationality. The self-report questionnaires were administrated in classroom situation permitted by headmasters. The students filled out the survey freely and anonymously.

Results

Emotional aspects of attitudes toward HC and EU

We assumed that the students had different attitudes towards HC and EU. The emotional aspects of these attitudes were explored by means of the Semantic Selection Test.

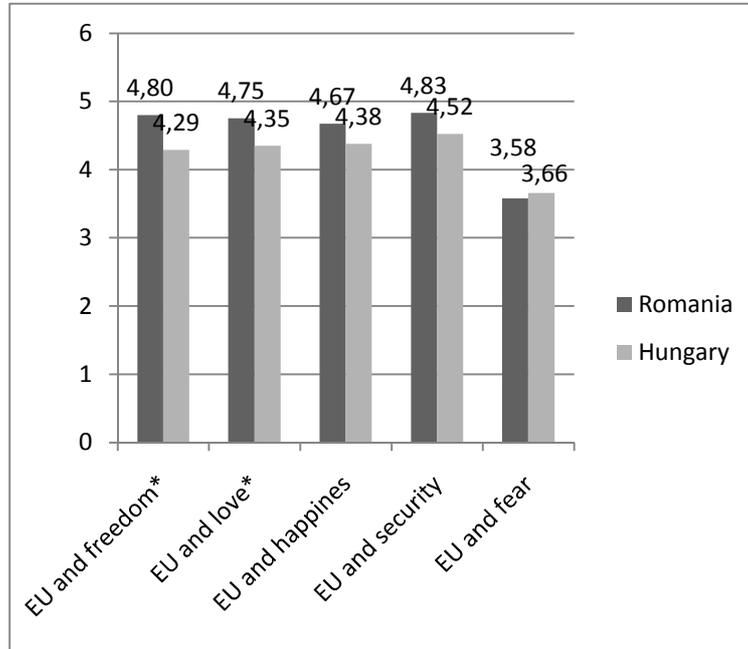
In the first step we explored the semantic correspondence between the Home Country and the EU. As you can see, the correspondence is a little higher than moderate (because the continuum is 0-8 points). So we can say that the HC and the EU are not too far from each other in the participants' semantic areas. The semantic correspondence between the Home Country and emotions (reference words) is shown by Fig.2.

Figure 2: Semantic correspondence HC and words of emotions (N=210)

The strongest correspondence is between HC and Security, and the lowest between HC and fear. These are not surprising results. One may expect that the home and security need to be strongly related to each other. And it is good that fear is not the dominant emotion towards HC. Love, freedom and happiness are almost at the same closeness to HC. There were no significant differences between the two groups (Hungarian and Romanian) in this question.

In the case of the emotional attitudes towards the EU we found significant difference between two groups. (see Fig.3.)

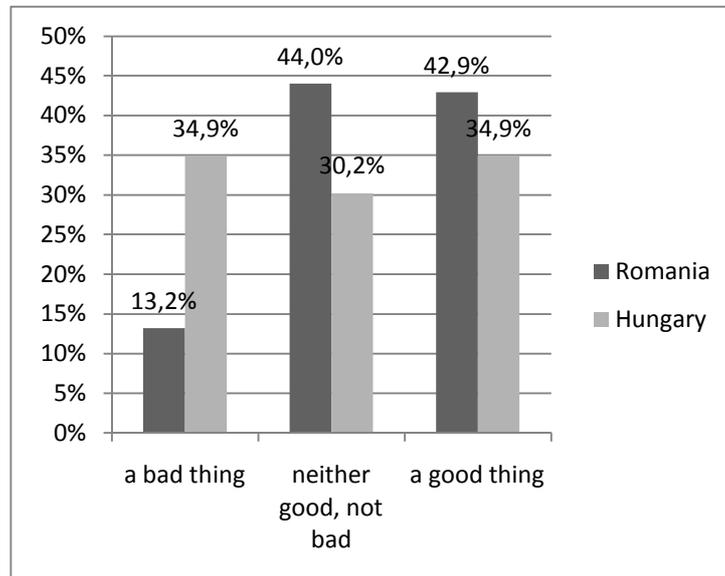
Figure 3: Semantic correspondence between EU and words of emotions (N=210)



As seen in Figure 3 the Romanian students have shown higher correspondence between the EU and the positive emotions, and a lower one in the case of fear. But the differences were significant only in two cases, regarding *freedom* and *love*. These findings suggest that the Romanians have just a little more positive attitude in these emotional aspects than the Hungarian students have.

Global opinion about EU integration

We would like to explore their explicit and global opinion about their countries' EU integration. The Figure 4 shows there were significant differences between the two groups in this aspect (Pearson – Chi-Square = 11,726 $p = 0,003$). A higher percentage of Hungarian students said that the EU integration of Hungary was a bad thing. Within the Romanian sample, approximately an equal percentage of students have ambivalent (or neutral) opinions and think that the integration was a good thing.

Figure 4: Global opinion about EU integration (N=210)

The personally meanings of EU

In this part of the structured questionnaire we asked the students: “*What does The European Union mean to you personally?*” We offered positive, negative and neutral (“Cultural diversity”) concepts to participants (see Table 1). They had to choose among the following answers: Yes, No or I don’t know. These answers referred to their personal meanings of the EU. The percentage of the answers are listed in Table 1.

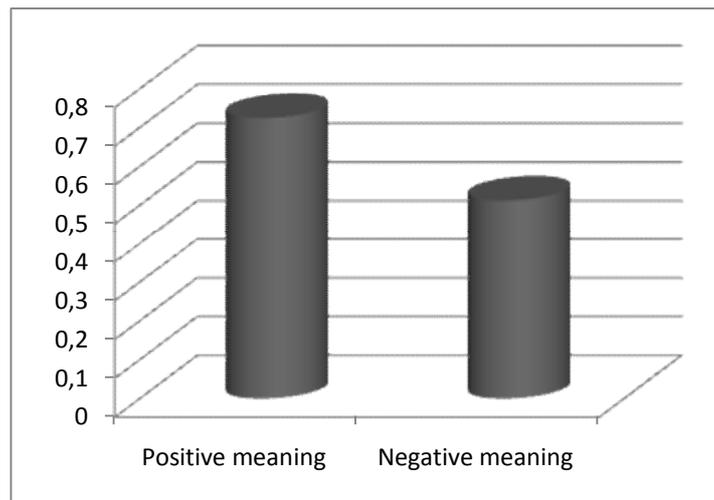
Table 1: The personal meanings of EU for students (N=211)

	YES %	NO %	Don't know %
1. Peace (+)	78,6	17,1	20,4
2. Economical prosperity (+)	50,2	33,6	15,6
3. Democracy (+)	55,0	22,7	22,3
4. Social protection (+)	54,5	25,1	20,4
5. The freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the E.U. (+)	92,5	33,3	3,8
6. <i>Cultural diversity (neutral)</i>	73,0	15,6	11,4
9. Bureaucracy (-)	27,5	19,9	52,1
11. The loss of our cultural identity (-)	28,9	49,3	21,3
12. Advantages for foreign companies in detriment of Romanian ones (-)	60,2	16,6	23,2

13. Insufficient control at external frontiers (-)	40,3	28,4	31,3
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The most frequent answers were the two positive items: “*The freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the E.U.*” and “*Peace*”. It is important to highlight that the “I don’t know” answers occur quite often (except the “Freedom to travel” item, which seems to be the clearest advantage for the students). There were no significant differences between the two groups, item by item. In the next step, we categorized the variables into two groups: items with positive meaning and items with negative meaning. The cultural diversity could be both positive and negative, depending on the participants’ ideas, therefore we left it out. The Figure 5 shows that the participants connected more positive than negative meanings to the EU integration of their countries. The participants associated significant more positive meanings to the EU than the negative ones ($t_{(45)} = 2,602$; $p = 0,001$). In this aspect there were no significant differences between the two groups.

Figure 5: The personal meanings of EU integration (N=46*)



(*The “I don’t know” answers were left out from the analysis)

The perceived negative consequences of EU integration

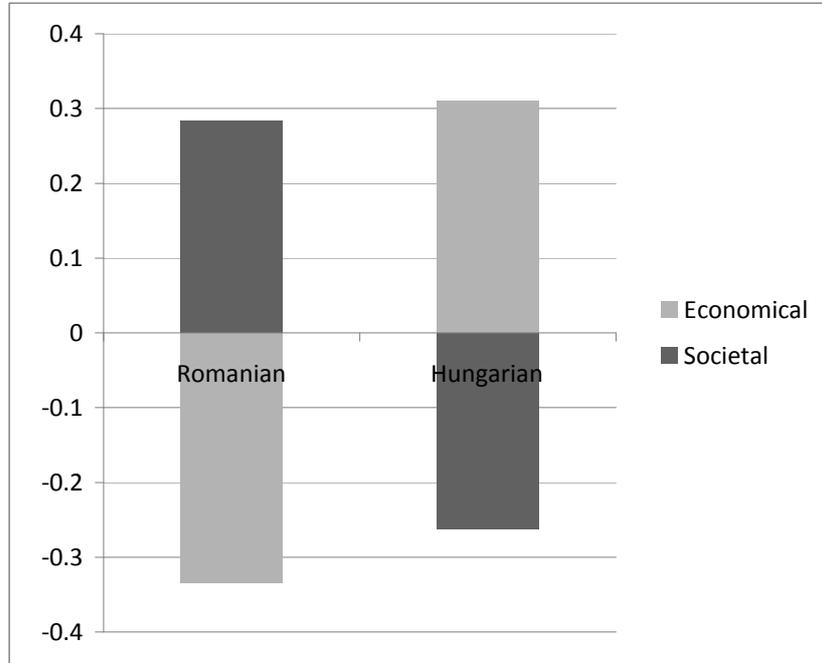
We have offered the students eleven potential negative consequences of the EU integration. We asked them to express their agreement or disagreement concerning these items on a 4 points Likert scale. The results of the principal analysis (Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization) showed that we obtained two discreet components (see Table 2) which referred to two different aspects of these negative consequences. These total variance explained by the two factors was of 56%.

Table.2: The rotated component matrix of perceived negative consequences (N=211)

	Components	
	1	2
Our country will pay more and more to the E.U.	,787	,149
The loss of social benefits	,778	,219
An increase of drug traffic and international organized crime.	,752	-,054
The departure of many Romanian/Hungarian people to work abroad.	,128	,758
The end of national currency.	,075	,729
The transfer of jobs to countries that have lower production costs	,053	,610

There is a significant difference between the two groups about the assessment of these consequences in the means of standardized factor scores. The Figure 6 shows that the Romanian students are more afraid of the negative consequences on the “societal” factor (1st component) and less worried about the negative consequences on the “economical” factor (2nd component). The Hungarians shared opposite opinions.

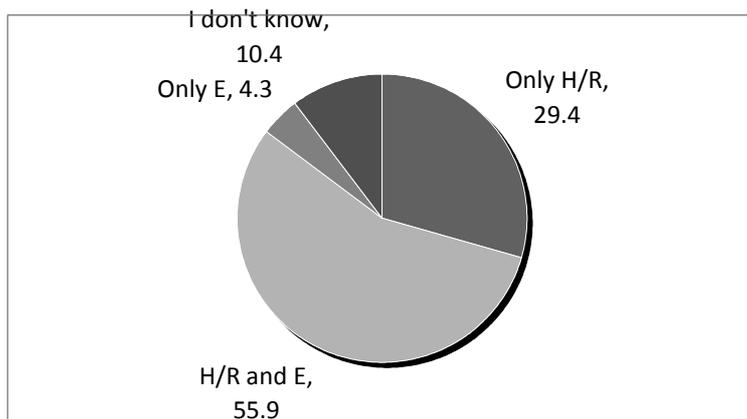
Figure 6. The means of standardized factor scores of perceived negative consequences (N=210)



National and European identity in self definition

In the end, we asked the students how they defined themselves in the near future. They had to choose from the given answers (Only as Hungarian/Romanian, Hungarian/Romanian and European, Only European and I don't know).

Figure 7: Identity - self definition in the near future (N=211)



As we can see in the Figure 7 most of them defined themselves using both the national and the European identity category. Almost 30% of the students have chosen only the national identity. The answer “only European identity” is the less frequent. Only 10% of the participants couldn’t answer this question. They might be in the searching stage of the identity development process.

Conclusion

The results show that adolescents from both samples appreciate the benefits resulted from the EU integration of their countries in accordance to certain strengths of European identity, as were proposed by Ross (2008):

- increased movement of persons for study, work and leisure,
- social welfare, even if sometimes it is seen as a benefit associated with the migration in EU countries considered more economical and social developed, comparing to their HC.
- respect and promotion of the human rights.

The attitudes towards EU were positive for both samples, but they were more favourable in case of Romanian adolescents, comparing to the Hungarian adolescents. As possible explanation we advance the idea presented by Tatar (2010) of the difference between the “newer” members of EU (Romania), which have a higher level of European pride than the “older” members (Hungary). The author conducted a study using the data from Eurobarometer surveys commissioned by the EU in 2006, 2007 and 2009. According to his analysis “exclusive” national pride is more frequent in old states-members than in new state-members (...) while the “exclusive” European pride is more present in new state-members’ (Tatar, 2010, p. 57). Also a higher percentage of respondents from the new state-members thinks about themselves as belonging to both their nation and to Europe, comparing to respondents in old states-members.

Another explanation could be a higher estimation of the benefits of the integration in EU for the Romanian adolescents, especially at the economic level, on the background of the global crisis.

Our results have to be interpreted with caution, having in view the limitations of our research, due to the small number of participants, opportunistic samples and omission of certain variables relevant for the identity development, including the identity status.

As future direction we mention that Europe, as a superordinated category, represents a new element inserted within the persons’ self-concept. It triggers a reconsideration process of the national group, of its position within the personal system of categorization (Chryssochoou, 2000). It would be interesting to investigate the European and national

pride in relation to the perception of the country status within the EU. Also it could be of interest to emphasise the relation between individuals' European identity and their perceptions regarding the meaning of European Union, motivated mainly as cultural-transnational system or as functional-utilitarian system (Antonisch, 2008).

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