



This paper is taken from

Identities and Citizenship Education: Controversy, crisis and challenges. Selected papers from the fifteenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network

London: CiCe 2013

Edited by Peter Cunningham

**Technical Editor: Angela Kamara and published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-20-1**

Without explicit authorisation from CiCe (the copyright holder)

- only a single copy may be made by any individual or institution for the purposes of private study only
- multiple copies may be made only by
 - members of the CiCe Thematic Network Project or CiCe Association, or
 - a official of the European Commission
 - a member of the European parliament

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as
Kovalcikova, I. & Petrucijova, J. (2013) 'An international academic discussion platform as a means of identity building for university; students' opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of EU membership', in P. Cunningham (ed.) *Identities and Citizenship Education: Controversy, crisis and challenges*. London: CiCe, pp. 42 - 52.

© CiCe 2013

CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

An international academic discussion platform as a means of identity building for university; students' opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of EU membership

Iveta Kovalcikova¹ and Jelena Petrucijova²

¹*University of Presov (SR)*

²*University of Ostrava (CZ)*

Abstract

The development of civic participation in post-Communist countries is usually described as a process of diminishing civic interest. Studies show that inhabitants of post-Communist countries differ from inhabitants of more traditionally democratic countries in being less involved in public affairs. Some authors describe this as a 'participational deficit'. In 2010, 12 European universities created a consortium for the EU MyUniversity pilot project: Decision making for a united higher education (EU CIP ICT PSP 2009 3bis, ref.numb. 256216). The project developed a platform for open discussion about processes of changes in various areas of academic life, increasing civic/academic involvement in decision making processes. This paper discusses the implementation of the project at European universities: 1. the forms of discussion, 2. the consequences of the participational deficit at universities. At the end of the contribution the results of an international survey, carried out using the European electronic discussion platform developed as part of the MyUniversity project, are presented. The survey focussed on differences in student opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of EU membership at both the micro and macro level (the advantages of membership for university students, citizens, advantages and disadvantages for the state which is an EU member). Student opinions formed a dependent variable within the survey, an independent variable being their country's level of involvement in EU structures: 1. Slovak Republic as a member of both the EU and the Eurozone; Czech Republic as a member of the EU but not the Eurozone; Turkey and the Ukraine as states which are not EU members.

Keywords: *academic discussion platform, participational deficit, EU membership, decision making.*

Introduction

Civic participation is a term which the former socialist bloc countries introduced into specialized as well as less formal discourse in the early 1990s from the English-speaking world. Prior to that, participation of citizenship in the decision-making processes was designated by other terms, such as joint decision making or co-participation. The concept of civic participation became an argumentative basis for civic initiatives because it captured a shift in the perception of the role of citizens from passive receivers to active agents of change. Civic participation is a manifestation of active citizenship.

'The concept of civic participation has a supra-individual dimension: it refers to an individual's engagement in the public sphere. Because of it a man asserts himself not as an isolated individual but as a social actor which realizes his civic potential, implements it in the practice of his civic self-actualization' (translated by the author; Roško, 2000, In Bútorová, Gyárfášová, 2010, p. 449).

Participation, which enables citizenship their presence at different levels, leads directly or indirectly to decision-making processes becoming more transparent and efficient. Civic participation enables people to see into the decision making processes, to understand them, to participate in them and to control them, and, ultimately, to become 'co-owners' of these decisions. In other words, developmental initiatives can become more successful when crucial decisions are accompanied with the feeling of the 'decision ownership'. The feeling of the ownership of decision emerges through the direct involvement of people in crucial decisions which in return directly affect them. Although supporting citizenship participation in making decisions may be difficult, complicated, time consuming and even impossible at times, in decisions made upon consensus the results tend to be often legitimate and acceptable to a higher degree than those made by representatives acting independently.

The evolution of civic participation in the post-communist countries used to be described as a process of linear weakening of citizens' interest. The claim has been supported mainly by quoting the decreasing election turnout (Bútorová – Mesežnikov – Bútorová, 1999, in Bútorová, Gyárfášová, 2010). Studies based on the data from comparative research done in the first years of the new millennium's first decade have demonstrated that citizens of the post-communist countries differ from those of the established democracies in one common trait, viz. lower engagement in public affairs, which some authors denote 'participation deficit' (Ágh, 2010, 76). Bútorová, Gyárfášová (2010) claim that post-communist countries are facing a significant challenge – to improve opportunities for civic participation in order that the public sphere would be open, inclusive and accessible to the widest segments of citizenship.

1 University as a space for systematic academic-civic participation

In 2010 a consortium of 12 European universities in their academic setting began to implement a pilot project EU *MyUniversity* (1): *Proces rozhodovania pre zjednotenie vysokého školstva (Decision making for a united higher education)*. The project offers a platform for open discussion concerning the processes of change in different areas and at different levels of academic life which can increase civic-academic participation in decision-making processes taking place at university and in its external environment.

2. 1 MyUniversity project description

The starting point for the formulation of project objectives was a necessity to create a unified discussion platform of European higher education. In the process of the project goals formulation a common European discussion platform was understood as a means of defining a discussion area for close cooperation and collaboration of governments, higher education institutions, students and staff members. The objective of MyUniversity project was to involve the members of academic community and other stakeholders in

university decision-making processes through the e-Participation platform. MyUniversity was designed as a pilot project whose objective was to verify and develop an integrated way of academic community members' involvement in decision-making processes, while enabling the development of appropriate recommendations and action plans aimed at the area of higher education. The target users (participants) of the e-Participation platform were expected to be students, university staff members and other academic community representatives who are bearers of relevant opinions regarding legislative aspects of education at both local and European levels. MyUniversity was expected to enable increased direct participation of the academic community members in decision-making processes by providing them with a unified area where to raise and clearly explain questions regarding educational policy and strategic plans. This information should enable academic community members to better understand the consequences of actions and strategic decisions adopted in academic settings. The interactive instruments of the platform (open forum, poll, e-petition, e-consultation) were designed to enable target groups to comment on the processes taking place in academic environment at local, national and international levels. The project coordinator was GFI NV Belgium. The participating partners were European academic and non-academic subjects which used, tested and evaluated applications of the platform in its pilot phase.

MyUniversity software platform consists of the EU Super portal and e-Participation portal for each participating university. The EU Super Portal enables the international debate of all project consortium members.

2.2 Expected results

The implementation of the project plans the following outputs (per one institution involved; for illustration, only some formulations of procedures are selected):

- The content of at least 10 decision-making processes within each university will be affected by the opinions of discussants and co-participating members and stakeholders.
- On average, members and stakeholders will be able to comment on 50% of all university decision-making processes through the electronic platform.
- On average, 12 eParticipation initiatives (open and platform-published discussion topics) per year will take place within each university
- Average participation in discussion within each process will constitute 15% of the total number of university staff members and students.
- At least 5 cross-border e-participation processes will be initiated.

2.3 An example of MyUniversity Super Portal utilization for the purpose of an international survey

In the following part of the paper the results of an international survey, carried out using the European electronic discussion platform developed as a part of the MyUniversity project, are presented. The survey focussed on differences in student opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of EU membership at both the micro and macro level (advantages of membership for university students, citizens, advantages and disadvantages for the state which is an EU member).

Question: how do the university students feel about the advantages and disadvantages of EU membership?

The aim of the survey: by means of an on-line questionnaire method, to gather the information about perceived pros/cons of EU membership in the country students originate from. Data were gathered through MyUniversity discussion platform. The survey presented the participation process of 'e-consultation', which represents one of the possible applications of MyUniversity discussion platform.

Participants: 200 students took part in the survey. They originated from 4 countries: 80 students came from Slovak Republic, 40 students from Czech Republic, 40 students from Turkey, 40 students from the Ukraine. All respondents were the university students at the time of data gathering.

Design: Student opinions formed a dependent variable within the survey, an independent variable being the level of their country's involvement in EU structures: 1. Slovak Republic as a member of both the EU and the Eurozone; Czech Republic as a member of the EU but not the Eurozone; Turkey and the Ukraine as states which are not EU members.

Method: the survey consisted of three questions: two open and one closed. Within the open questions, a respondent was supposed to express 1. what advantages does a citizen living in an EU member state come across and 2. what kind of disadvantages does a citizen living in an EU member state experience. The closed question represented scaled item (with 1-5 scale range), where respondents marked their level of agreement with the following statement: 'I am happy/I would be happy that/if the country I live in is/would be a member of EU'.

Open questions were applied in order to reveal the respondents' subjective meaning of the studied phenomenon. Data analysis was done in the following way. The associations expressed were weighted. The first association – the immediate response – was scored 5; the second association 4; the third 3. There were no more than three associations expressed by particular respondent. All associations got a weight. After each association has been weighted, the next step was categorisation. Associations with similar meaning were put together to form a category. The total weight of a category was counted and its proportion within the total weight of all associations (100%) was calculated. This way, the significance of different categories of meaning could be compared. In accordance with the survey design the student opinions formed a dependent variable within the survey, an independent variable being their country's level of involvement in EU structures: 1. Slovak Republic as a member of both the EU and the Eurozone; 2. Czech Republic as a member of the EU but not the Eurozone; 3. Turkey and the Ukraine as states which are not EU members. The differences in statements and category weight of students from countries with different level of involvement in EU structures - Slovak Republic (SR), Czech Republic (CZR), Turkey/the Ukraine (TRU) - were compared.

2.4 Research results

As was mentioned above, our main method was applied in order to reveal the subjective meaning of the studied phenomenon. As is stated in Diagram 1 the students' answers within question 'EU Membership advantages' have been coded into 23 categories. 'Travelling and no need for permission' is the highest grade category and the only

common for all groups of EU and Non-EU students – 90% TRU, 74% SK and 68% CZ. The importance of the category for students corresponds to the conception of citizenship elaborated by Urry (1995). Describing the citizenship issue Urry suggests six new categories of rights, two of them are *mobility citizenship* – the rights of visitors and tourists moving through other countries and societies and *cosmopolitan citizenship* – everyone has the right to relate to other Citizen, cultures and societies without state interference. In the opinion of Isaacs (2008, pp. 44-47), '... increased levels of mobility, for study, employment and for leisure, breaking down barriers, decreasing scepticism and broadening views about the cultural values of others...' is a distinct and positive sign of the European identity.

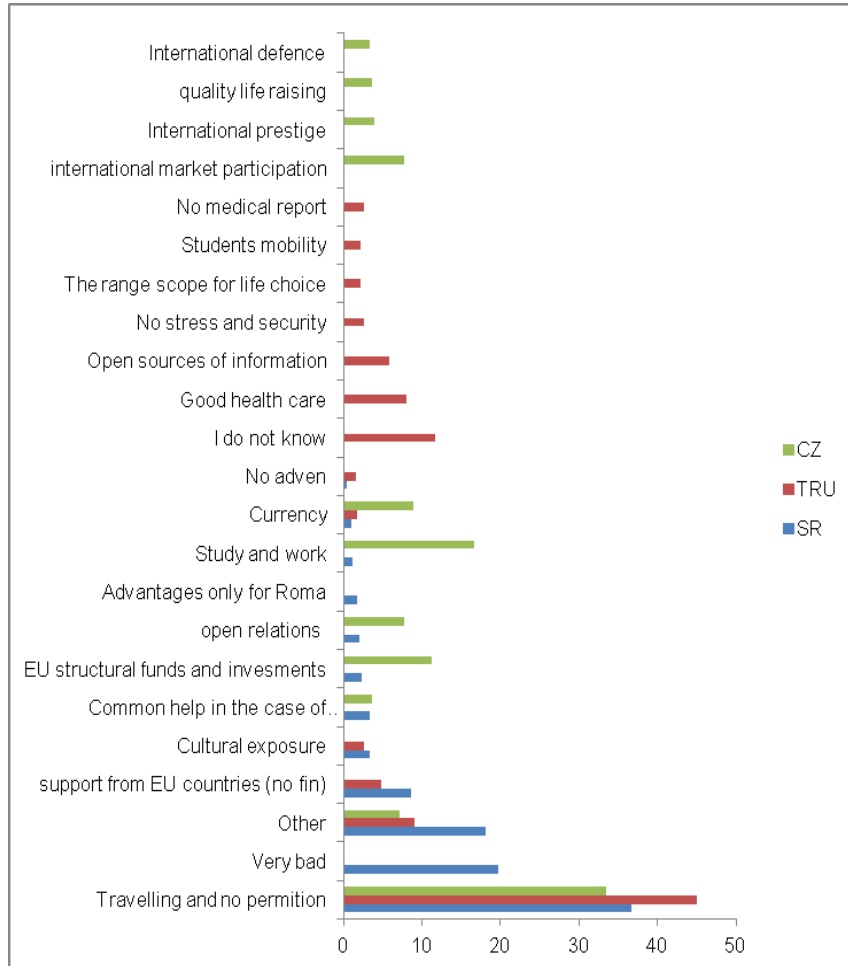
'International market participation' (16% CZ), 'EU structural funds and investments' (approx. 22,6% of Czech students), 'open market and open relations' (15,6% CZ and 4,2% SK) or 'study and work abroad' (approx. 36% CZ) are concerned to economical dimensions of membership, primarily reflected by CZ students.

The understanding of EU as a common geo-political space works in statements 'common help in the case of emergency' (SK, CZ), 'international defence' (CZ), 'security' (TRU) – the grades are not high but presented in all groups.

'I don't know' answered 23,4% of TRU students. 'Good health care' (16% TRU), 'open sources of information' (11,6%), 'no medical report' (5,2%), 'the range scope for life choice' (4,4% TRU) are categories of importance in the opinion of non-memberstate students.

Partial conclusion: CZ students reflect primarily economic and political sphere, TRU students are more focused on social advantages and one of the basic political rights – the right for information, SK students' answers are spread over wide rank of topics: 'cultural exposure', 'common help in the case of emergency', 'study and work'. A few categories involve negative connotations: 'very bad' - 39,4%, 'advantages only for Roma' – 3,6%.

Diagram 1: Advantages of EU membership – EU countries: Slovak Republic, Czech Republic; nonEU countries: Turkey, The Ukraine



In the part 'EU Membership disadvantages' (see Diagram 2) the only category shared by all groups of students is 'the loss of national sovereignty, external control': 88,6 % – CZ; 38,6% – SK; 34,2% – TRU. It discloses the students' understanding of the European Citizenship. As a trans-national political formation the EU in fact negates the traditional conception of sovereign national state focused on 'national independence' as well as on the congruence between state and nation. At the same time in 1991, when the EU member states shaped the category of the European Citizenship, the important element here was the stated intention that this European citizenship should be seen as a complement to citizenship at a national level, not as its replacement. The threat to national identity may be presented in the category of 'migration and e/immigration', either: 25,7% of Czech and 10% of Slovak students give their opinion, even though all groups of students highlight 'travelling and no permission' as top category of 'EU

Membership advantages' (90% - TRU, 73% - SK, 68% - CZ). Despite of being the citizens of multinational and multiethnic states, Turkish and Ukrainian students aren't conducive to this category, i.e. 'migration and e/immigration' as membership disadvantage, but surprisingly 25,7% of them reflect EU as a space of similarity, which 'can be boring'.

There are several overlapping and for the time being contrary inclinations: in a number of European countries there are concerns and on-going debates about the possible impact of immigration upon their respective nation's culture. The growth of the EU and pressure to bring European states within European identity brings itself conflict with the growing demand for the independence or recognition of minorities, group of newcomers and cultural diversity of Europe. The intensive processes of migrations have caused the phenomenon of multiculturalism, which raises the issue of 'new' dimension of citizenship – *the cultural element* and cultural rights. Marshall (1992, p. 8) divides the concept of citizenship into free elements: civic, political and social. Renato Rosaldo (1994, pp. 402-411) defines 'cultural citizenship' as 'the right to be different' while enjoying full membership of a democratic and participatory community. The students' negative opinions on 'migration and e/immigration' may indicate that the myth of national culture is still more powerful than the multicultural model. In the opinions of Czech (7,1%) and Slovak students (4,2%) newcomers are seen as 'a cheap labour force from the East' (the category of low weight).

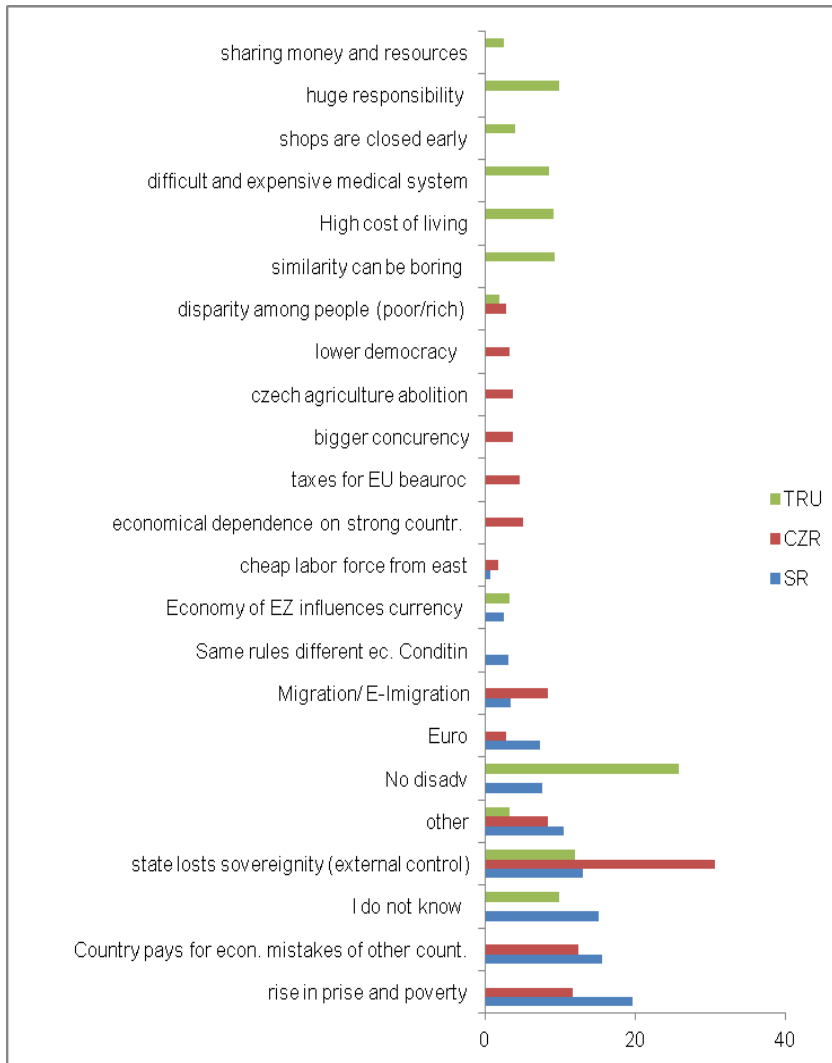
The differences in students' opinions expose their national background, historical and cultural experience of the country they live in. Answering the same questions students reflect different elements of citizenship. The Slovak students point out disadvantages in civic and social dimensions. As a member state of EMU zone Slovak students reflect the issue of interlinked European economy. In the part of 'membership disadvantages' 45,7% of them mention the negative impact of economic crisis, when member states 'pay for mistakes of other countries' (alluding the economic help to Greece meanwhile the country 'race in the prices and poverty' in the opinion of 55,7% of Slovak respondents). 34,2% of the Czech students refer to the topic of 'the mistakes of other countries' as well; however, this aspect is not mentioned by their TRU coevals. Slovak students emphasize various economical aspects: 'Euro' – 20% of respondents, 'same rules but different economic conditions' – 12%, 'economy of EMU zone influences currency' – 9%. Numerous groups of Slovak students (20%) coin the idea about exclusive positive impact of EU membership declaring the statement 'no disadvantages'.

The statements of the Czech respondents present a wider rank of opinions reflecting economic, social and political dimensions. Beside above mentioned topics of 'lost sovereignty' (88,6%) and 'migration' (25,7%) respondents mention 'economic dependence on strong countries' (14,2%), 'taxes for Brussel bureaucrats' (13,0%), 'bigger concurrency' (11,4%) and strictly formulated 'Czech agriculture abolition' (11,4%). Czech respondent take a pot shot at 'low democracy' (10%), 'Brussel bureaucrats', i.e. reflect political element of EU citizenship, and touch upon social element presented by 'disparity among poor and rich people' (9% Czech respondents). 7,1% of Ukrainian and Turkish students pay attention to last topic, as well.

The prevailing opinion of Ukrainian and Turkish students represents 'no disadvantages' of EU membership with 74,2%. Meanwhile their other coevals primarily reflect

disadvantages in social and economic spheres: 'high costs of living' (25,7%), 'difficult and expensive medical system' (23%), 'sharing money and resources' (7,1%).

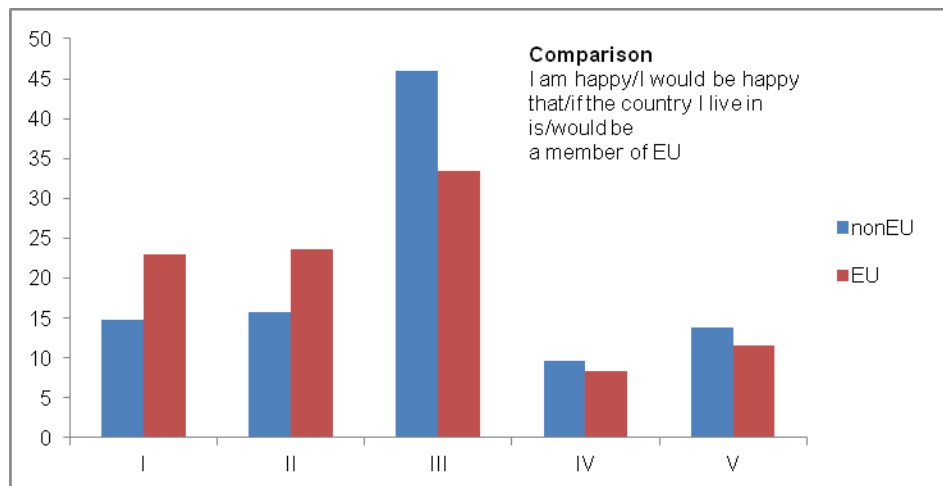
Diagram 2: Disadvantages of EU membership – EU countries: Slovak Republic, Czech Republic; nonEU countries: Turkey, The Ukraine



The last question 'I am happy/I would be happy that/if the country I live in is/would be a member of EU' is graded up to 5 points (see Diagram 3). One-option choice reveals that 92% of TRU students and 67% of EU students tend to mark the third grade, i.e. they 'are not sure'. 29,6% TRU 'definitely agree' and 28,8% 'definitely do not agree'. The choices of EU students are very similar: 67% choose the third grade, 46% - 'definitely

agree' (the higher value than non-EU students) and 23% 'definitely do not agree', i.e. they are rather loaded in favour of EU membership than TRU coevals.

Diagram 3: Comparison of an attitude to EU membership – EU countries: Slovak Republic, Czech Republic; nonEU countries: Turkey, The Ukraine



Legend:

I – V: represents the scale for the expression of agreement/disagreement level, where

I – I agree

V – I disagree

Conclusion

In the conclusion we aim to reflect on: 1. the analysis of initial experience from discussion platform pilot running within 12 European universities, 2. the analysis of survey results. The initiation of the platform into the academic community consciousness demanded great effort and direct contact with students and management staff at universities and their faculties. Within the platform propaganda, a series of hierarchically organized meetings with potential platform users was carried out. The aim of the meetings was the presentation of the platform; each time the projection of the platform environment was secured and its application and technical possibilities were introduced. It can be stated that platform users - academic community - preferred a passive approach, in a sense that if they are not directly and personally invited to discuss issues by their teacher, they prefer reading the comments to actively participating in the discussion. We however think that in the research-proven-participation-deficient environment, where no tradition of open discussion on current topics exists, the number of registered users and the state of discussion is a good starting point for further and more effective implementation of the platform. Students and teachers simply have to get accustomed to this means of internal academic communication. Platform implementation requires great effort for the platform promotion at various levels.

The survey is considered a form of students' participation in the local community life within project MyUniversity portal (particularly EU membership survey). Partial conclusion: the kind of involvement into university activities which can be described as an example of 'participation deficit' at the universities in CZ, SK (even after 25 yearlong period of new democracy). Similar experience has been noticed by project partners at 12 participating universities during the whole period of project implementation. It can be said that there parallelly exists low interest in public affairs in both target groups- university management and whole academic community, i.e., teachers and students as well. The aim of the paper is not to analyse in details all factors standing behind the low interest of academic community in public discussion portal. The members of Trial Management Team at all universities have evaluated the contextual, sociological and political aspects of latent (anticipated) and manifested (recorded in the process of project implementation) participation deficit in the academic setting. One would expect that the cognitive elite could be distinguished by the higher rate of civic participation, especially in the case of topics directly related to the enhancement of academic setting and decision processes at particular universities. We suppose that the follow-up project could in more details study the causal relationship between a type of civic participation and variables that explain its character.

Citizenship presupposes interdependence of rights and obligations; it opens options and insists on responsibility. Being complementary EU membership and national citizenship are mutually connected. Partial conclusion: interpretation of students' answers within 'responsibility awareness context' shows, the topic is reflected by 28% of TRU students in the part of 'EU membership disadvantages'

The content analysis results of students' answers reveals 'one-way relationship' from EU to national level. No answer reflects possible national contribution to the Union. Students comport themselves as citizenship consumers instead of being active participants. Withholding the reasons of students' consumerism and 'participation deficit' the survey challenges to deeper research.

Nevertheless, the carried out survey may suggest that it is in students' arguing for and achieving self-awareness that enactive learning happens.

- (1) The project is partially funded under the ICT Policy Support Programme (ICT PSP) as part of the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme (CIP) by the European Community, (CIP-ICT PSP-2009-3bis), Ref number: 256216

References

- Ágh, A. (2010) Post-Accession Crisis in the New Member states. Progressing or Backslidig in the EU? *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 2, 1, 74-95.
- Bútorová, Z. – Gyárfášová, O. (2010) Občianska participácia: trendy, problémy, súvislosti. *Sociológia*, 42, 5, 447 – 491.

- Isaacs, K. (ed.) (2008) *Images of Europe: From within and beyond*. Pisa: Pisa University Press.
- Marshall, T.H & Bottomore, T. (1992) *Citizenship and social class*. London: Pluto Perspectives.
- Rosaldo, R. (1994) Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy. In: *Cultural Anthropology*, 9(3), 402-411.
- Urry, J. (1995) *Consuming Places*. London: Routledge.