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

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Intersecting identities: young people's constructions of identity in south-east Europe

*Alistair Ross
IPSE, London Metropolitan University (UK)*

Abstract

This is the fourth in a series of presentations based on the development of a project being undertaken under the aegis of a Jean Monnet Professorship. Previous papers (Ross 2010, 2011, Ross et al. 2012) reported on the Baltic states, the Visegrad states, Turkey, Iceland and Cyprus. This paper focuses on two European Union states that border the Black Sea, Romania and Bulgaria. What discourses do young people use to construct their sense of identities, in relation to their potential national identity and potential European identity? I examine these in the context of Bruter's (2005) thesis that identities can be constructed round institutional or cultural axes; Jamieson and Grundy's (2007) descriptions of 'passionate' and 'indifferent' Europeanism, and the emerging descriptions of generational changes in identity, reported variously by Fulbrook (2011) and Miller-Idriss (2009). In these two countries there was an ambivalence expressed about the extent to which the countries could be described as 'European', that suggests a degree of liminality. I suggest that there are significant differences between the constructions of identities in these two locations when compared to other new EU states.

Keywords: *identities, social construction, Bulgaria, Romania*

This paper examines the intersection between potentially conflicting territorial or political identities of the self that arise as young people in Bulgaria and Romania attempt to reconcile their potential memberships of a national community, a regional Balkan identity, and a European identity. The educational implications of this analysis relate to young people in a much wider context than these two south-eastern European countries. At the time of writing, they are the most recent members of the European Union, joining in 2007, but they will soon be joined by Croatia (July 2013), and very likely within the next four to six years by six or seven other Balkan states. Some of the implications will resonate much more widely than the Balkan peninsula: the tensions of multiple membership of different and nesting political entities, and of being a 'global citizen' are becoming more common and pressing across Europe and beyond.

McCall (2005) describes intersectionality as 'the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations' (p 1171). She also interprets the term as encompassing 'perspectives that completely reject the separability of analytic and identity categories' (p 1171, footnote 1). The traditional axes of identity used in intersectionality (eg Kimberlé Crenshaw 1989) were gender and race, to which social class, ethnicity and ability have often been added. Intersectionality theory suggests that social oppression is not based on these factors in a way that is independent of each

other, but that they inter-relate and intersect to create multiple forms of oppression and discrimination (eg Ritzer 2007).

In this paper other potentially intersecting dimensions are added to this. The constructions of identity by young people in south-eastern Europe – in particular in the two Black Sea states of Bulgaria and Romania – are structured in part by dimensions of nationality, regionalism and Europeanisation. These shape, and are shaped by, each other to create a tangled and complex nexus of suppressed or oppressed identities. This ‘multidimensional conceptualisations’ (Browne & Misra, 2003) may help explain how socially constructed categories of difference interact to create a hierarchy of social identities in these young people. Following McCall’s (2005) categorisation of approaches to intersectionality, I am here using both intercategory and intracategory stances: I both use the existing categorical distinctions of nationality, regionality and Europeanism and at the same time question their utility and relevance in the contemporary context. In doing this, I am simply reflecting the constructions advanced by the young people themselves who, while readily employing these categories, at the same time struggle with the distinctions and contradictions between them. They appear to recognise that they, and their generation, cross the boundaries of constructed categories.

The two countries analysed in this paper are part of a much larger study of young peoples’ constructions of identity in the newer states of Europe that I am conducting. This has been described in more detail in Ross (2010, 2011) and Ross et al (2012). Identities are increasingly recognised as being both multiple and constructed contingently, and may include a range of intersecting dimensions, including gender, age and region (Lutz et al, 2006). How do young people manage to construct these related but different identities? Are there tensions between these constructions, or can they be reconciled (Licata, 2000)? Young people in these countries are attempting this in very different conditions to those experienced by their parents or their grandparents at the same age: are they conscious of this?

Methodology

These are complex questions. Rather than use questionnaires or interviews, both of which impose direction and meaning on the subject, I use focus groups to stimulate discussions on these topics between small groups of young people (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Because this study is of how young peoples’ ideas are socially constructed, and because social constructions are created through interaction in a social context, focus groups have the advantages of being able to allow the investigator a modest degree of access to the discourses they may use between themselves, and allowing the young people to an extent to set an agenda for what appears to them to be relevant to their own lives. A focus group is not simply a serial semi-structured interview, in which the same question is put in sequence to each member of the group. It is more of a discussion, primarily between the young people themselves, into which I put a number of issues on which to focus. Permission was sought from the young people and, for those under 16, from their parents.

The project would not have been possible without help from many people¹. Schools and parents have been recruited, arrangements made for visits and, critically, help given in translating many of the transcripts. With many older groups in both of these countries I was able to work most of the time in English, accompanied by interpreters who help translate particular phrases or vocabulary that presents difficulties.

I worked in seven locations in these two counties, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Locations of focus groups in Bulgaria and Romania

Bulgaria

<i>Locations</i>	<i>population</i>	<i>number of schools</i>	<i>number of groups</i>	<i>number of students</i>	<i>dates of interviews</i>
Veliko Tarnovo	69,000	2	2	12	22-23 Apr 2010
		2	2	15	15 Mar 2012
Blagoevgrad	71,000	1	3	19	14 Mar 2012
Sofia	1,292,000	2	4	26	16 Mar 2012
3		6	11	72	

Romania

Focus Groups: locations, numbers

<i>Locations</i>	<i>population</i>	<i>number of schools</i>	<i>number of groups</i>	<i>number of students</i>	<i>dates of interviews</i>
Timișoara	307,000	2	4	26	11 – 12 Oct 2011
Oradea	206,000	2	4	25	13 - 14 Oct
Iași	317,000	2	4	30	17 - 18 Oct
București	1,930,000	4	4	24	19 - 20 Oct
4		10	16	105	

Identities in context

I have used two particular frameworks in my analysis of the construction of identities in this analysis of these two countries. Michael Bruter (2005), analysing the emergence of mass European identity, describes territorial identities as having two component elements, the ‘civic’ (identification with ‘the set of institutions, rights and rules that preside over the political life of the community’) and the ‘cultural’ (identification with a certain culture, social similarities, values’). This potential dichotomy between civic and cultural Lynn Jamieson and Sue Grundy (2007) describe how some young people ‘come to present themselves as passionate utopian Europeans, while for many being European

¹ I am particularly grateful to (Bulgaria): Katia Christova, Evelina Kelbetcheva, Katya Simeonova, Galia Slavcheva and Mirela Vasilva, and (Romania) Ciprian Ceobanu, Carmen Ceobanu, Magda Ciubancan, Magda Danicu, Carmen Dutu, Alin Gavreliuc, Aurora Goia, Tudor Iordachescu, Simona Laurian, Elena Mazareanu, Eleana Mitu, Monica Opreescu and Monica Secui; also the heads/principals of the schools and the students, and at London Metropolitan University, colleagues in IPSE, particularly Angela Kamara.

remains emotionally insignificant and devoid of imagined community or steps towards global citizenship’.

In addition to these frameworks, I will also raise a couple of specific themes that arose in Bulgaria and Romania that pervaded much of their talk: firstly, a tension between a sense of powerlessness and an assertion of agency in terms of their ability to participate effectively in Romanian society; and secondly a profound ambivalence about Romania’s location within Europe. Liminality emerges as a defining theme. Many young people in both countries professed elements or quality of ambiguity or disorientation (Turner, 1967): they appear conscious of “standing at the threshold” between their own nationality and Europe, and in some ways to be oppressed, or at least isolated by each of these. The intersection of national identity and European identity created tensions and alienation.

Bulgaria and Romania: a brief background

It might for some readers be useful at this point to provide a very brief outline of the development of these two states –much of this informs contemporary constructions of identities. The two countries, although neighbours with broadly similar economies, have had very different histories.

Bulgaria has a population of about 7.5 million people and, with a per capita GDP of about €1,200 a year, is the poorest country in the Union – the purchasing power per capita is about 45% of the EU average. Romania has, in European Union terms, a large population of 21.4 million, and with a per capita GDP of about €1,700 it is second poorest EU country: but it has a large territory (ninth in size in the EU). Both joined the EU in 2007. Both were largely agricultural countries with a predominantly rural population in the late 1940s, by the 1980s had become industrial economies. Following the end of the communist period 1989-90 the shock of entering a market economy caused a sharp drop in industrial and agricultural production and economic collapse in the late 1990s. Growth in both countries was strong in the early 2000s, but contracted in 2009, since when growth has been positive, but low. Unemployment is at 7% in Romania, and 12% in Bulgaria.

The Soviet Union occupied Bulgaria in 1944, and it soon became the People's Republic of Bulgaria, ruled by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). After an oppressive Stalinist phase there was from the early 1950s a degree of liberalisation and economic development. Standards of living began to rise, but there was also an assimilation campaign directed against ethnic Turks in the 1980s: some 300,000 Bulgarian Turks left to Turkey, and agricultural production slumped. The collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe after the summer of 1989 led to demonstrations in Sofia that became a campaign for political reform. Free elections were held in the summer of 1990 were won by the Communist Party, ridden of its hardliner wing and renamed the Bulgarian Socialist Party. In 1991 a new Constitution created a parliamentary republic with a directly elected President and a Prime Minister accountable to the legislature. The 1990s saw several changes of government and massive unemployment as uncompetitive industries failed and the backward state of Bulgaria's industry and infrastructure were revealed (Spirova, 2010).

The Soviet occupation of Romania in 1944 also led to the establishment of a communist government, and the country was under direct military occupation and economic control till the late 1950s. The Romanian government used the *Securitate* to eliminate state enemies. Nicolae Ceaușescu came to power in 1965 and pursued policies more independent of the USSR – condemning the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, for example. This led to substantial western investment, but pressure from the World Bank and IMF then led to Ceaușescu reimbursing all foreign debt through policies that impoverished the Romanian people – and reinforced the powers of the police state and his own personality cult. Stan (2010) observed ‘Of all communist Central and Eastern European countries, Romania remained the least reformed, the most likely to deny basic human rights, and the only one with a sultanist-cum-totalitarian regime right up to the moment when communism collapsed’ (p 380).

In December 1989 the Romanian Revolution became the most violent and forceful overthrow of a communist regime. The National Salvation Front took some partial ‘original democracy’ and liberal marketisation measures, but did not renounce communism. Romania developed closer ties with Western Europe, joining NATO in 2004, and the European Union in January 2007. Romania has a growing diaspora of about 2 million people (in Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, Canada and the US) (Stan, 2010).

How do young people construct their identities?

For the purposes of this study, these events have meant that these young people have had radically different experiences to those of their grandparents and parents. Do young people identify with the cultural and civic aspects of Europe? Do they use the same components in their identification with their country? Do they acknowledge a multiplicity of identities, or is their identity singular? Does their sense of identity require the construction of ‘the Other’? This question is of particular significance to the subjects of this study: as the borders of the European Union continue to demonstrate their flexibility, are there (in the minds of these young people) limits to Europe: where does the frontier lie?

Focus groups offer a powerful way to address these questions. My opening question challenged them to describe themselves and their identity. What did it mean to them to be Bulgarian or Romanian? How else might they describe themselves, and did they think their parents and grandparents feel this in the same way as them? Did everyone in the country feel the same? I then asked if they sometimes felt European, and how they might describe the characteristics of a ‘European’. Finally, I asked them to consider the possible advantages and disadvantages of particular other countries joining the European Union. Could, for example, Russia, or Turkey, or Serbia become a member of the same club? These countries, as will have become clear, had various historical relationships with each of these two countries.

Analysis of the discussions showed a wide variety of responses, but there were some particularly interesting trends evident. The ways in which they expressed their identification with their own country were often qualified: there were reservations about

what were sometimes seen as shortcomings in their fellow countrymen. These in turn made them uncertain about having a sense of European identity: Europeans were thought to have behavioural characteristics that were not (or could not) be matched by Bulgarians or Romanians. They might be members of the European Union, but nevertheless felt that they were accepted on sufferance, and that they were not *really* European – or at least, not European *yet*. Neither nationals or Europeans, they were in a liminal borderland situation, neither one thing nor the other. Asking if Russia or Turkey might be thought of as European produced further confusion and possible marginalisation. The intersections of national identity and European identity produced uncertainty.

National identities

In both countries there was certainly evidence of pride in the country by many young people. This was sometimes simply seen as a natural response to having been born and brought up in the country. For example, Basia K (BG ♀ 17¾) described Bulgaria as ‘my native country, it’s my home. I feel like I’m in the right place’. In Romania, Oana N (♀ 13½) said ‘I have been in many countries, and here I feel like home. There, when I am on the street, I feel very strange’. But Erika I (♀ 16¾) in Timisoara was not unusual when she said ‘this is the country where I was born – but I don’t feel related to it. This is my house, but not my home’. Two Bulgarians put this succinctly: ‘I think it doesn’t matter if we are Bulgarian, or if someone is Turkish ... the nation doesn’t matter, we are all human, and we have to be open to other countries, other nations’ (Pavlina P, ♀ 15¾); ‘I am proud of being Bulgarian too, but in these days the nation is just a formality. It doesn’t matter where you ... come from’ (Gavril D, ♂ 15½).

These feelings of pride in one’s country were related to both history and culture, rather than political institutions and the structures of the state. Particularly in Bulgaria there were references to pride at having survived the ‘five centuries’ ‘under the Turkish yoke’. Borislav T (♂ 16¾) said ‘We have been five hundred years under Turkey, but we had the power to rise and take our country again ... which I think is pretty good thing to do’. But the references to Bulgarian culture sometimes included implicit or explicit recognition of the Ottoman elements within this, as when Valentin P (♂ 16½) referred to the culture as ‘really interesting, because we’re right on the border of Europe and Asia, and we have something from both cultures’. There were as many references to historical pride in Romania, such as Daniela D (♀ 17½): ‘... being Romanian means having a certain respect for the historical people, and I’m very proud that, after several wars and fights with other powers, we managed to be all right in the end, even if we are not as good as the other countries’.

The second major area of national pride in both countries was in the natural landscape, and the flora and fauna. But this was frequently qualified with references to how some of their fellow countrymen’s disregard for the environment, and pollution and littering were often mentioned. In Romania Silvia P (♀ 16) said ‘we do not know how to appreciate [the country] – to preserve this, not to throw garbage on the streets’.

In parallel to expressions of positive feelings for the country were widespread criticisms of the way in which Bulgarians and Romanians behaved. In both countries there were

many *ad hominem* comments that ‘people’ (a term that apparently did not include the young people in the discussion groups) had ways of thinking (often ‘a mentality’) that was selfish, anti-social or simply old-fashioned. Thus Mircea D (♀ 16¼), a worker’s daughter in western Romania, said ‘sometimes you are ashamed of being Romanian, because other people do all kinds of unpleasant things’. Fellow countrymen often behaved badly, especially those working abroad; and the Roma minority were particularly criticised in Romania (less so in Bulgaria). In both countries, politicians were criticised as self-serving and often corrupt. These factors, they said, led to their countries being perceived badly by members of other European states. The following paragraphs examine each of these assertions in turn.

In both countries there were complaints that people were inclined to talk about problems, rather than actively seek solutions. In Bulgaria, Branimir B (♂ 16¾) said he was ‘not proud that Bulgarians talk, but they don’t take action when they ... don’t like something’. People were selfish, and there were popular expressions about this: in Romania Ionut M (♂ 14¼) said ‘They care only ‘If my dog dies, the neighbour’s dog should die too’, while in Bulgaria Borislav T (♂ 16¾) said that ‘we look at the other [person]’s plate. If I have a problem, I want my neighbour to [have one] too. ... There is a pot in hell full of Bulgarians – nobody can get out of it, because each person pulls down the others’.

There was, they claimed, a common disregard for civil rights: Nikolai C (BG ♂ 15½) said ‘we don’t search for our rights – in other countries, you see something that you don’t like, you ... tell the police and they take the case - problem solved. But in Bulgaria you just close your eyes to it, and don’t pay any attention to what happened’, and Izabela U (RO ♀ 16) said (in a rare reference to gender equality) that ‘in Romania that the men are seen as more important than the women – the man defines the place’.

Several Romanians said that their fellow countrymen were feckless: Ionut M (♂ 14¼) ‘my country ... has people who are like sheep. They follow each other, they do as their neighbours’, and Gabi B (♂ 11½) ‘people in Romania ... want to finish work too soon, to work less’. Bulgarians were said to have antiquated patterns of thinking: when Daniel B (♂ 16½) said ‘I think our thinking is old.’ Ventsislav K (♂ 16½) offered an explanation: ‘this is because we have been slaves for about 500 years – this is why we are not so ... open minded’.

In Romania, the Roma minority in particular were criticised, and there was some indignation that this community had appropriated the term ‘Roma’: several said that the Roma were not Romanian. Lucian S (♂ 12¾) asserted that ‘the gypsies are harsh and they mug you and try to do a lot of bad things’, while Nina A (♀ 14¾) said that they ‘ere not Romanian, they are different from the Romanian people – they are their own nationality. Europeans make this confusion, that Romanians and gypsies are the same’. ‘Our reputation is very low because the gypsies who are born in Romania have Romanian passports – they are not really Romanians’ Dumitru D (♂ 14¼) explained. Even expressions of sympathy were constructed through terms of ‘othering’ and blame: Jean R (♂ 17½) ‘the gypsies ... trigger that attitude from us, because they are the ones who have misconduct’. In Bulgaria, attitudes appeared rather different: speaking of minorities within the country, Nikola A (♂ 16) said ‘some ethnic groups which are

isolated from the social life of Bulgarian ... society - they won't feel as patriotic as the not-isolated Bulgarians - gypsies, Turkish, that kind of people.' Anti-Roma feeling was associated with older generations: Aleksandar C (♂ 13¾) said his 'grandfather thinks that all the problems in Bulgaria come from the gypsies and marginal groups', to which Teodor T (♂ 13½) added 'the Roma are not bad people – I [think] ... that its people from all groups who make problems – the problem isn't just in this group'.

In both countries, politicians were criticised as self-serving and often corrupt. In Bulgaria, Toma S (♂ 12½) said 'Politicians are liarsmost Bulgarians don't like Bulgaria because of the government'. In Romania, Cosmin L (♂ 13¾) claimed 'the government simply destroys everything. The people ... hate the government, but they keep voting for the same rubbish leaders, again and again'. Corruption was mentioned frequently: Marian T (♂ 15¾) was 'very concerned about corruption – in Romania there is a lot ... especially at a high level' and Ana P (♀ 13½) said 'president, Băsescu, has I don't know how many houses! All our money is in their pockets, and nobody does anything about it.' In Bulgaria, Sergei S (♂ 16) complained 'What pisses me off is that we see corruption at the lower levels – there is a corruption everywhere, but in other countries its at the higher levels and people don't see it'.

These behavioural characteristics were all seen as contributing to the poor perception of their countries by members of other European states. This was sometimes based on personal experiences: Abela F (♂ 14¾) from Romania said she 'went to France for a summer vacation - I spoke with my parents in Romanian, and everyone was looking at us in the metro like this [arms crossed across front to guard wallet, bags, etc] – with their bag and that – being Romanian these days isn't very nice, because we are seen as thieves, gypsies and so on'. Some were aware of negative media attention: in Bulgaria there were references to a recent right-wing Netherlands political party's website that had been making derogatory comments about Bulgarians: Toma S (♂ 12½) said that as a consequence people in the Netherlands 'when they hear Bulgarian they think "Oh, this is rubbish", because our reputation in Europe is very, very bad'.

These comments were frequently tinged with expressions of a sense of powerlessness, that they lacked the agency to affect society and politics. In Romania, Olga M (♀ 16) said 'we don't have the power to change ... we've tried to change the President and to vote – 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', and Amelia S (♀ 16.0) felt 'we cannot make any changes because of the bad things, and the bad systems have very deep roots'. There were also assertions that they could make an impact: Amelia S also said 'we are responsible, being Romanian - we have to improve the situation'. The issue, of young people wanting to migrate from Bulgaria or Romania, was divisive. Borislav T (BG ♂ 16¾) explained that 'there are two types of people of our age now – 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.

These young peoples' identification with Bulgaria and Romania respectively appears to be strong on the cultural side: there were many expressions of affection for the country. This was a feeling of warmth, rather than of chauvinism: there were very few

nationalistic remarks, and a number that showed sympathy for a more global identification. But there was also a pervasive critical element about aspects of Bulgarian and Romanian behaviour, and references to out-dated and inappropriate conduct. Generally there were few references to the institutions of either state, apart from historical references to independence.

European identities

This sense of uncertainty and diffidence about their construction of a national identity was paralleled in the European sphere. A European identity was acknowledged by some, but a sense of distance, of hesitancy, about 'being part of Europe' was more commonly articulated. Most saw European identity as distinctly subordinated or secondary to their sense of being Romanian or Bulgarian. Thus Mihail B (RO ♂ 15¾) said he felt 'more Romanian than European - I don't really have the thought of being European that often.' Others said that they were European simply in the geographical sense: Nikola A (BG ♂ 16) said that 'every country that is in the territory of Europe, every nationality, should feel European ... it doesn't matter if it's in the European Union or not - we're all European, even though some countries aren't as advanced as Germany, Italy, those kind of countries', and Vladimär M (BG ♂ 13½) said 'I don't think we *should* feel European - we *are* in Europe, on the continent.' For others, it was simply a consequence of European Union membership that made them European: so Todor R (BG ♂ 14) asserted 'we are surrounded by Europe. We are part of the European Union, and we became [a member] in 2008'.

But many of these and similar expressions concerned Bulgaria or Romania as a country being European, rather than being individual feeling of a European identity. Many suggested that they might, as Romanians or Bulgarians, be European in a titular sense, but that in reality this was not accepted by 'the Europeans' themselves. Others said that they did include a European dimension in their identity, but they were also aware of being rebuffed in this. 'They' were constructed as something different from 'us', and Europeanism was to be defined on 'their' terms. Consequently, some of these young people felt that Europe had rejected them - or at least, had not accepted them (as in the example of the Netherlands above). So Abela F (RO ♂ 14¾) said 'In the registers, they say we are, we are Europeans - but I don't feel like it', and Loredana Z (♀ 13¾) 'I feel European, but the other people in Europe discourage us'. How could Romanians feel European, asked Anatolie U (♂ 13½) if everyone in the other European countries 'says that we shouldn't be in the European Union, and that we don't deserve to be?'

There was a sense that 'being European' meant either belonging to a more developed economy, or to having a different culture and mentality. In Bulgaria, Rada V (♀ 15½) simply said that 'the other countries in Europe are much more advanced than us', and Fidanka M (♀ 16) said she found it 'a little hard to feel like Europeans, because there are some big differences between the Bulgarians and some European countries'. In Romania, Mirela B (♀ 16¾) claimed that to be European 'means being part of a developed country, being respected'. Being a European meant behaving in a particular (and non-Bulgarian) way for Teodor T (♂ 13½): 'I feel Bulgarian when I see someone throwing trash in the streets; I feel European when I make him pick it up and put it in the bin'. Europeans were in some way better able, or more likely, to follow social rules.

Although the examples often given were of throwing litter on the street, there was a sort of bystander response (Darley and Latané, 1968): Bulgarians and Romanians would not follow rules (the young people said) unless everybody else followed them.

In particular, ‘Europeans’ were held to have a different mindset, a different ‘mentality’ to the Bulgarians and Romanians. Anelie V (BG ♀ 16¾) said ‘I don’t feel like a European person ... everyone thinks only for themselves, out of self-interest..’ Olga M (♀ 12) talked at length about striving to be European and to be different: ‘Bulgaria in some ways doesn’t let me be a European, because I don’t always think before I act ... that’s why I want to be a European someday. ... Europe is different because of its culture and its heritage – people in Europe are more self-aware.’

Europe was ‘over there’ in the west, a different place where they behaved differently and in what was seen as a more ‘civilised’ way. Vladislav P (BG ♂ 12½) explained that ‘to be European ... you must behave like a European, and Bulgarians don’t behave like this... Europeans behave very well, they are polite to shop assistants – some Bulgarians are rude to them; and in European countries everyone has manners’.

It seems that what ran through many of these comments was a sense of not feeling fully European, or fully European *yet*. For some, this was simply a matter of material progress: Borislav A (BG ♂ 12½) said that in Greece he had seen little pollution and well-made streets – ‘it makes people have a European sense. In Bulgaria we have the opposite – so we are not Europeans’. Gala I (♀ 13¾) said she ‘would feel European if we could end the problems that are affecting our parents. The lack of work.’ Europe was thus, in a sense, elsewhere, not to be found in this part of the world. Vlad P (♂ 17¼) spoke of Romanian culture as Eastern European; ‘in the Balkan regions there are very powerful Slavic influences’; for him, the heart of Europe was in Western Europe – ‘the bedrock of Europe, so to speak – it has achieved some degree of cultural dominance’. Madalina B (RO ♀ 16¼) referred to Europe as ‘in Finland and those countries, they are more civilised and organised’.

There was a sense of liminality, of being on the border of being European and perhaps of anticipation of the potential to cross that frontier. Toma S (♂ 12½) said ‘I don’t think we are Europeans *yet* The country is not really European, because it’s not improved to a European level, so it’s not European yet’. Valentin P (BG ♂ 16½) said ‘I think that in five, ten years time we will say that we are European.’ Both Romanian and Bulgarian young people had a view that their countries were marginal to Europe, and marginalised by Europe. They seem aware that they may be on the threshold of some new, European, way of political and cultural expression (Thomassen, 2009). In a period of liminality social hierarchies are in flux, traditions may become indeterminate, and the future of these young people see for themselves is fluid and uncertain (see Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra, 2009).

A few instead – or as well- asserted an alternative Balkan identity: Sergei S (♂ 16) is typical of these: ‘I mostly feel like a man from the Balkans, not so much a European. Because we have a different structure here, in our thinking. I don’t feel like a person ... from England or France but a guy from Serbia or Montenegro, I think I’d be similar to him’. Europe was somewhere else, said Gogu G (RO ♂ 14¼) – it was ‘Germany,

France, Italy, Spain – a lot of countries. I guess it's about us, and maybe the Bulgarians – we didn't take advantage of being in the European Union until now. ...They have another way of thinking – they think differently to us.'

Europe was thus for some of these young people a problematic construct. It was in some senses a desirable attainment, but as yet not achieved, and at the same time had an exclusiveness that meant that they felt rejected. Europe was thus seen partly as cultural – something that Bulgarians and Romanians 'ought' to share, but of which there was some uncertainty, and also to do with something described as 'behaviour', which seemed to encompass activities from financial probity to being conscious not to litter the streets, where it was felt that they fell short. But Europe was seen also as institutional, and here there was a greater sense of focus and of anticipation. Yet Europe, in an emotional sense, remained distant, cut off partly by the attitude of 'other' Europeans to them, partly by their own distrust of their 'mentality'.

Constructions of European identities and of the boundaries of Europe

These constructions were given a different twist when groups were asked to consider the possibility of particular other potential partners in the European Union. I asked them first to consider the possibility of Russian membership, and then Turkey: both countries that have had have played significant roles in their countries' histories. Instead of presenting short quotations from different groups, I now present some longer extracts from a single group in Iași, Romania.

Asked in they felt that they might consider themselves as European, Cristian T (♂16½, son of a builder and a postal delivery worker) said

No, I don't think so. Because we can't compare ourselves to European countries like Germany, England, France, Spain, maybe – we aren't in the same bracket.

I asked if Romania was part of the European Union.

Cristian T Technically. On paper.

Beryx D (♂ 16, parents booksellers) Up till now, I've never felt that I'm European ... and if I felt it, I never got help from anybody – nothing changed.

Several minutes later, I asked how Europeans were different from other people.

Cristian T A sort of breed of efficient people – and wealthy countries – that's about it. Yes, you must have something in common to create a Union. You don't have a culture in common, so what remains in the industry, the economy ...

Beryx D In Europe, most countries are at the same level – for example, in Germany, if someone has a problem – let's say an incurable disease - the State helps him – gives him money, gives him a place to stay ... In Romania, no one helps you, you remain on the streets. It's not the same, even if we are in Europe. No one helps us.

And then, further into the discussion, I introduced the idea of Russian membership of the European Union.

Cristian T I think they can't [join]. Because if we look at the history, they always did different. While we have economic downturns, they register 400% increases, and being such a big country – sort of hungry for more land, for more power – they wouldn't cooperate well with the European Union. They ... I don't see them as people who can obey rules very easily, and have common sense.

Andrei M (♂15¼, father an engineer) I also think that it's not possible ... countries that [become] a member of the European Union should be those on the European continent,

AR I'm interested in what you said about Russia being different from from whom? From Europe, or from Romania?

Cristian T I think from Europe. Because we try to be sort of politically correct here, and they don't really – they have a sort of – We, we Europeans as well – especially you British people – have a history, a habit, of exploiting underdeveloped countries, colonies and so on. But they have a bigger habit of doing this, and a more recent habit of doing it.

AR Do you agree with what Cristian T says?

Several Yes, yes

AR I'm going to press you on this – because you're now talking about 'we Europeans' -

Cristian T Aghr! [exasperation at being caught out, and recognition of what he's said]

AR ... but before you said that you didn't feel European. Can you explain this sort of thinking?

Cristian T Yes, yes, I know ... as a mentality, as a country, I think of us being exactly in the middle – I think we incline to be more European-ish than Russian. We, we evolved towards the European, I think.

When the possibility of Turkish membership was introduced, Andreai M was in favour, despite it being located on two continents, but now Cristian T argued that 'Russia is much more European' [geographically]. Andreai T agreed: 'Well, yes, Russia is much more European because their people are more like us, they even look more like us – Turkish people, they have a different colour of their skin'; to which Emil V (♂ 14½) retorted 'The culture isn't that different'.

Identities at this point become contingent and multiple. Compared to the European Union states, Romania (and, to a lesser extent, Bulgaria) are seen as outside the group. Compared to Russia, both countries moved across the border, and became European.

Many in Bulgaria were less opposed to potential Russian membership: some felt that all countries that were in Europe, or even partly in Europe, should become members, while others perceived Russia as a rich and powerful state that would help the Bulgarian economy. . eligible states. But there were also references of cultural and historical

affinities and divergences: Violeta G (♀ 12¼) said ‘we have almost a common language’, while Olga (S12 ♀ 12) thought ‘Russians and Europeans are different, maybe that difference would make them feel uncomfortable. ... Not only the culture, but the way the people think, the way the people act’.

For some of the Bulgarians, Turkey was a particular issue: Ventsislav K (♂ 16½) argued ‘I don’t think I would like it if Turkey joined – I don’t really like them that much, because we’ve been their slaves for five hundred years –’, to which Vladimära G (♀ 16¾) replied ‘It’s a different generation, and we are not slaves any more, and it doesn’t matter that we have been under them for 500 years’. Similarly, Petar S (♂ 13¾) argued ‘What happened between Turkey and Bulgaria was a long time ago - in the same way it happened in world war two with Germany and the whole world - nowadays Germany and the other countries are friendly with each other, and so, I think Turkey and Bulgaria should be the same’. Several Bulgarians argued that Turkey was too different culturally, and in doing so (as with Cristian T in Romania) re-orientated their own sense of being European. Thus Valentin P (VT21 ♂ 16½, parents owning a small company) initially said that when he went to other European countries ‘I feel a bit different from them, and not like [a] typical European’, but later said ‘When I went to Turkey, I felt European, when I saw their culture and how they live – the culture is different than ours, and I felt European there, because it was different...For Turkey to become a member of the Union – their culture is very different, and I don’t know how they will reconcile their culture and religion ...I don’t think they will feel European.’ There appeared that, particularly in comparison to Turkey, that there *was* a European culture, and one that Bulgarians might possibly share. A European culture was initially questioned, and sometimes denied, but sometimes followed by recognition that – when Turkey could be ‘othered’ - there was a common culture with other Europeans.

Some tentative conclusions

Bulgaria and Romania present an interesting paradigm in studies of the new Europeans. These young people present not just multiple identities, but a confusion of multiple identities: proud of Bulgaria or Romania, but sometimes rejecting it – their country could be modern, prosperous and ‘European’, but also had a people whose ‘ways of thinking’ condemned the country to be marginalised, relatively impoverished and unchanging. Theirs was a country in which they could perhaps live and work in for the future but also a country that they should leave, perhaps permanently; marginalised in Europe, but also integral to Europe and at one with it in terms of modernity and outlook; in close cultural harmony with their parents and grandparents, but also on the threshold of a new generational attitude. They were insiders and outsiders.

These constructions strain both Bruter’s (2005) and Jamieson and Grundy’s (2007) models of European identity. Were they attached to cultural or to institutional aspects of their country, or of Europe? In some ways, they were detached from both. Neither Bulgarian or Romanian institutions of government were a focus for identification: but there was also a sense of bipolarity about the culture of their country: aspects like the natural beauty, the history and the past were strong themes around which rapport was established, but there was ambivalence about the cultural traits of the respective peoples, a sense of distancing themselves from the way that ‘Bulgarians thought’ or ‘Romanian

thinking'. Passionate enthusiasm or indifference? Both were evident, often expressed by the same individual. There were similar paradoxical relationships with Europe: while the institutional structures were welcomed – the mobility, the prospects of study abroad, the financial support for the country, and sometimes the emphasis on rights – the degree to which there was an *identification* with this is less clear. The same is true of the cultural and behavioural aspects of Europeans. In both cases these were admired, but not fully participated in: partly because of their compatriots own behaviour. Romania and Bulgaria became liminal, territories on the border of Europe. But when the lens was shifted to examine states beyond the European Union, then institutional and cultural affinities with Europe moved to the fore: indifference became sometimes a more ardent attachment.

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