

'The Iron Curtain did not dissolve very well': Reflections on EU Citizenship from CEE peripheralised perspectives

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Politics in Central Europe (ISSN 1801-3422)
Vol. 20, No. 1
DOI: 10.2478/pce-2024-0004

Abstract: *Peripheralisation is determined in socio-demographic, economic, political and identitarian factors. It is, many say, by definition, characterised by a willingness to migrate, in particular among the younger generations. European citizenship comes with the right to migrate – to relocate, to work and to be treated as equals in many respects to the local citizenry. In this research paper, I explicate the results of twenty interviews in six CEE countries with 7th-graders who were asked what they thought of European citizenship. Those who knew what this is give widely divergent answers, but there are two dominant themes running through their perspectives: they do not feel great affection for the EU, and whilst willing to migrate, they do not appreciate the need to do so. Thus, they feel the EU does not live up to its promises to deliver equality for all Europeans. One explanation they give for this is that 'the Iron Curtain did not dissolve very well': the burden of history is acutely experienced.*

Keywords: *European citizenship, peripheralisation, inequality, CEE History*

Equality and democratic citizenship

Citizenship in democracies holds out the promise of equality amongst those sharing that status. Democratisation is on the one hand a process of establishing institutions relevant for the functioning of the political apparatus (and its checks and balances), it also presents a way of closing social relations to people who are not citizens on the one hand and of opening them (in principle) to those who are members of the same demos (Brubaker 1992: 46). Thus, the

institution of citizenship presents winners and losers of a 'birthright lottery' (Shachar 2009) that distributes social, economic, political and education-related opportunities in accordance with the accident of one's extraction or place of birth. Both winners and losers share in principle their status with others of the same citizenship, and close access to those of another citizenship. Thus, whilst democratic nations are internally organised horizontally, they are internationally organised vertically.

If we focus on the horizontal organisation, we notice that democratic citizenship over time tends to generate equality within a nation-state (Lessenich 2019). This is because, as the political sociologist Stephan Lessenich argues, the course of democratisation involves ever new waves of inclusion that are accompanied by attempts to resist this new inclusion. Those fights for open or closed relations within the demos are, for Lessenich, the very essence of modern democracy. For instance, what in 1789 was a revolutionary perspective on the equality of 'all Frenchmen' excluded most men and all women. Feudal systems are characterised by a great distance between the power structures in a territory and its inhabitants, particularly if they were serfs. By conferring citizenship to (initially only adult, male, tax-paying) inhabitants, the state is admitting that these people are at least in principle fit to rule themselves rather than being ruled by others, or at least fit to determine who runs the country (Ther 2022: 24). Women and excluded men slowly gained the civic, political, social and economic rights that determine modern citizenship and thus became part of the demos. So democracy, Lessenich argues, is not just a style of government, but it is a lifestyle. And this lifestyle includes the fight for inclusion in the demos, as well as the resistance against it.

So debates concerning the composition of the demos continue, as Lessenich argues, now revolving on closing the ranks against the 'huddled masses yearning to be free' – or yearning to escape poverty, or just on the lookout for adventure – who come from abroad on the one hand, and on trying to force the higher classes to open their ranks to those who strive for better lives from within. Those who argue for openness or closure always do so with their personal profit in mind. Thus, conflicts concerning the openness or the closeness of any society are archetypal democratic conflicts that are continuous and open-ended. This is because the claim that the demos is a society of equals is always a normative claim concerning formal equality – which is concordant with a great deal of substantive inequality. So the working classes close ranks against the peripheralised, the migrants and the non-working poor, and demand more openness from the middle classes, the middle classes close ranks against the working classes and demand more openness from the upper classes, and so on, and all try to achieve a better status for themselves or at least to maintain their current status by defending from 'below'.

Citizenship in a democracy which thus, over time, generates new claims to equality and legal frameworks guaranteeing equal rights for increasing numbers of people, without necessarily achieving equality in practice. Equality in practice always falls short of its claims in theory. But equality in principle serves to delineate those who belong to the demos and those who do not.

Citizenship in the EU on the other hand confers mainly one type of substantive equality amongst EU citizens: the equality of freedom of movement, and this only for the purposes of work, where work is understood in a conservative sense as remunerated work (as opposed to care work, art or volunteering). The amended treaties of Rome and of Maastricht afford EU citizens the right to move and reside freely in any member state and, for example, to vote in local and European parliamentary elections. It outlaws discrimination against citizens on the basis of nationality, and it seeks to combat discrimination on the basis of sex (as had the original Treaty of Rome), ‘race’ or ethnicity, religion or belief, disability or sexuality (Dean 2019). ‘However’, as Gerhards and his colleagues have argued, ‘Survey results show that only 56 percent of respondents support the idea that EU migrants and national citizens should be treated equally’ (Gerhards et al. 2020, n.p.).

What this might mean is not immediately clear. The notion of equality has a number of components, amongst which we find ontological equality and equality of access to resources. To claim that other Europeans are not equal may thus mean either that there is some intrinsic status to which they cannot lay claim – for instance, by seeing them as equally European, but not of equal value. Some political sociologists argue that Central and Eastern European citizens have been subject to racialisation or ethnicisation, thus being regarded as ‘white’ but not equally white (Böröcz 2021, Parvulescu – Boatcă 2022 refer to ‘dirty whites’ and ‘internal peripheries’). Alternatively, equality might mean that some Europeans should not have equal access to social resources in comparison to long-term residents (Manow 2018, 2022). Thus, the view that some are unequal is ambiguous. Inequality might mean having a differential status or a differential right to access resources.

It is becoming clear that whilst European citizenship holds out a number of promises – of equality, of supranational identification options, of a sense of belonging – it continues to fall short of expectations. Interestingly, what EU citizenship does offer effectively is precisely the one feature that has most been taken advantage of in the past decades: it fosters ‘people’s ownership of the integration project through the recognition of “special rights” to Community citizens. These “special rights”, in the model of supranational citizenship that eventually made its way into the Treaties, are based on reciprocal recognition, among the Member States, of the status of their respective nationals’ (Strumia

2017: 674). In other words: It allows for relocation to other EU member states, the right to settle, work and profit from the social insurance plans offered to local citizens.

The massive loss of employment, social security and income in CEE states after 1989 caused a substantial level of migration of young men, a loss of skilled labour, a rupture of family bonds, communities, congregation and associations (Aust et al. 2022: 117). And yet, the very groups of young people who are planning on emigrating (as argued in Pates 2023) are highly hesitant on articulating a positive perspective on the very institution that allows them to do so.

This puzzle – that young Europeans planning on making use of relocation rights offered to European citizens are highly hesitant to identify as EU citizens – is best explained with reference to the overarching promises made by the European Union, namely, the promise of equality. It turns out that young people see their options for a future as requiring emigration precisely because they are in many ways not equal or not seen as equal to their (Western and Northern European) peers who get to stay in their regions of origin. If European citizenship functioned as promised, it would allow everyone equally to stay or to migrate. Substantively, they are unequal, meaning the CEE youth feel they need to migrate in order to have a future, whilst others can choose careers, good incomes and a dignified life in the regions of origin. That is, the equality promised – an equality for those who relocate internationally within the EU – is not the equality CEE youth seek, although they are prepared to take advantage of it. The substantial equality they would prefer would require considerable redistribution of resources to make all European youth face comparable futures – in their places of origin.

The research project

This analysis is based on 20 focus group interviews in secondary schools with 16–17-year-old students which we conducted in the autumn and spring of 2021–2022 in two of the most peripheral NUTS 3 regions in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia (for more details on the project, see Lorenz – Anders 2023). The research was funded by the EU as part of the *Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence* at Leipzig University ‘The European Union and its rural periphery in East Central Europe’.

We had first developed a peripherality index along five indicators: GDP in purchasing power standards per capital, employment rate, median age, travel time to the closest regional centre and accessibility to ‘services of general interest’ (by which we meant hospitals, supermarkets and pharmacies). For each indicator, NUTS 3 regions that performed worse than the national average were given a score of 1 and we thus determined the degree of peripherality in relation

to the national context. For each of the five countries, we then identified the two regions that ranked highest in each country. Within these regions, we identified towns with 20,000 to 30,000 inhabitants and within these towns, secondary and vocational schools; we kept the type of settlement and the context conditions comparable. We assumed that these regional centres would show a reasonable number of commuters to the schools from more rural areas. The students we spoke to were 11th grade students, and we conducted the group interviews in the local language (which was not always the native language of the students) and with groups of 8, trying to ensure gender parity in each group. There were two exceptions. In the secondary school in Lučenec (Slovakia), only seven students participated and in the vocational school in Moreni (Romania), 20 students participated. Participants were told that the interviewers were interested in what people thought about their lives in the EU. To keep group discussions comparable, several questions were used as a guide. Six questions concerned the young people's perceptions of their own personal situation, their town and their plans for the future, their perception of EU citizenship and the rights connected to it, and the EU elections.

The collection of data: Cases and schools

In Hungary, the towns we picked were Siófok in the southern Transdanubian region and Karcag in the northern Great Plain. Siófok has about 25,000 inhabitants and Karcag nearly 20,000. Siófok is a popular tourist destination, Karcag is characterised by natural gas production and agriculture. In Siófok, one class from the Krúdy Gyula vocational school and one from the Perczel Mór secondary school participated. The group discussions in Karcag took place at Nagykun Református secondary school and Varró István vocational school, which are located in the city centre (for more details, see Mandru – Vig 2023).

In Romania, the towns we chose were Moreni, a town situated in Dâmbovița County in the Wallachia region, and Caransebeș, a town in Caraș-Severin County, in Banat. Similar in size (18,000 vs. 21,000 inhabitants), Moreni is an old industrial town whilst Caransebeș is a medieval town designed around the Orthodox Cathedral Învierea Domnului. The schools selected in Moreni were the technological 'oil' high-school and the national college 'Ion Luca Caragiale'. In Caransebeș, we interviewed students at the 'Traian Doda' national college and the 'Decebal' technological high school (for more details, see Ferenczi – Micu 2023).

In Poland, the towns we focused on were Sandomierz, a municipality on the Vistula River in southeastern Poland, and Nowa Ruda in the Lower Silesian Voivodeship, in the southwestern part of Poland, close to the Czech Republic, each with roughly 22,000 inhabitants. Sandomierz is characterised by its well-preserved historical town centre. Nowa Ruda also has a historical town centre with traditional textile manufacturing and mining industries, few of which

are still in operation. In Sandomierz, the interviews were conducted at the high school and the vocational school, which share a large building complex. In Nowa Ruda, we selected the high school in a residential but central area, whilst the vocational school is located more peripherally (for more details, see Stosik – Sekunda 2023).

In Czechia, the towns we elected were Sokolov, located in the Karlovy Vary region in the west of the country, on the border with Germany, and Chrudim, located inland in Eastern Bohemia, about 11 km south of the larger Pardubice. One of the most important industries in Sokolov is the Uhelná coal power plant. The Pardubice region, to which Chrudim belongs, is characterised by industries such as electrical and mechanical engineering, chemical production, manufacturing, the agricultural and food industries, as well as commercial and public services. The schools in Sokolov were a vocational school, *Integrovaná střední škola technická a ekonomická Sokolov*, and a secondary school, *Gymnázium Sokolov*. The schools in Chrudim were the vocational school *Střední odborná škola a Střední odborné učiliště obchodu a služeb*, and the secondary school, *Gymnázium Josefa Resslera* (for more details, see Stangenberger – Formánková 2023).

In Slovakia, the towns we selected were Ružomberok, with its 27,000 inhabitants, located in the northwest of Slovakia, *Liptovský Mikuláš* located about 30 km east of Ružomberok, with about 31,000 inhabitants, and Lučenec, a town of about 28,000 inhabitants, located in the south of Slovakia, close to the Hungarian border. We spoke to students at the vocational school in Ružomberok, *Spojená škola—Stredná odborná škola obchodu a služieb Ružomberok*, at the secondary school in *Liptovský Mikuláš*, *Gymnázium M. M. Hodžu*, and at two schools in Lučenec, the vocational school *Stredná odborná škola hotelových služieb a dopravy v Lučenci* and the secondary school in Lučenec, *Gymnázium Boženy Slančíkovej Timravy*. The vocational school is a bilingual school with many students of a Hungarian background (for more details, see Stangenberger 2023).

The research process

The interviews were held in the local languages by native speakers, transcribed and translated, and subsequently collectively interpreted in a research seminar during the summer term 2023 in the department of political science at Leipzig University. The interpretation method used was grounded theory. This is a style of qualitative research that aims at systematically interpreting qualitative data using both inductive and deductive approaches (Strübing 2004). The analysis of first cases allows for first theoretical concepts. This is followed by a 3-stage coding process that, as a rule, is a collective process. The first step consists of open coding and the structuring of the material according to themes in an interactive process: the interpretation is intersubjectively secured (*ibid.*: 99). The next step consists of developing categories, which are abstracted and generalised

themes (Przyborski – Wohlrab-Sahr 2014). Finally, selective coding allows for the determination of core categories that serve to explain the phenomena being researched and allow for the generation of the central theory (ibid.: 211).

One clear set of resultant codes concerned the willingness to migrate to regional or national centres or to move internationally (analysed in Pates 2023). Given their decisive articulation of preferences in favour of migrating themselves, either to urban centres in their countries of residence or to Western European countries, what do the students make of the very institution that allows them to conceive of such a future? What, in other words, do they make of the EU citizenship? The results are mixed; clearly, there is no consensus on the usefulness of the EU to the individual across countries, classes and situations. Some patterns, however, could be discerned across these cases, which I shall present in what follows.

In the presentation of my results I shall not be quoting from every interview nor from every school, not because nothing interesting was said, but because I was looking for patterns; and these patterns are sometimes more succinctly or poetically articulated in some case rather than others, which leads to them being quoted. But all the results were found repeatedly (otherwise they would not amount to a pattern). I shall also not present the results on the basis of one of the countries, languages spoken or school type, because the data situation in this research project does not allow us to come to conclusions concerning any one country, region or town. Still, two main patterns emerged with regards to the question of EU citizenship and equality. First, there is not much interest in or affection for the EU, though it is deemed useful mainly in the sense that it allows for easy migration. Second, the anticipated need to migrate is seen with resentment: the students regard the EU as having allowed for a great deal of inequality, resulting in unevenly distributed opportunity structures across the EU, and the freedom of movement that comes with EU citizenship is but a weak compensation for the inequality. The students see themselves as being on the losing side of the opportunity lottery, and as inheritors of historic disadvantage, as I shall show.

The Results

A. 'All that connects us are borders'

That something is shared with others – a narrative, an ascriptive feature, a purpose – is part of the meaning of a collective identity (Delitz 2018). There are clearly students who feel attachment to the Union, even if it is sometimes articulated with some hesitation – though this attachment is pragmatic and concerns students having an option to emigrate: 'For example, if someone finishes school and can't find a good job in Poland, they just go abroad, and thanks to the EU

there's no problem to go to e.g. to Germany to work and come back without any problems' (2021118B_Nowa Ruda). The most positive utterances amongst all the interviews in the five countries (Hungary, Poland, Romania, Czechia and Slovakia) were made by Slovakian students who see their national and their EU identities as intertwined, as shown in the following quote: 'Well, I don't think there is that much difference [between EU citizens], because Slovakia is part of the European Union, so we don't feel that much of a difference, so to speak. And we think of it more as a general thing, that we are citizens of both, that we don't make any difference' (210930B_Lučenec). Slovakia was also the country in which the students appear to identify with the EU on an emotional level. For instance, one student said that in her opinion, 'we are like one big family, we help each other' and 'it is such a given that we are citizens in the European Union', listing the free movement of the EU as 'uniting' factors. Others mention that they have never experienced not being EU citizens but regard membership positively.

The Czech students on the other hand also identify with the EU, but do not claim to have much affection for it – they only mention the economic advantages membership brings them, by highlighting EU funding of infrastructure and everyday life. One interviewee illustrates this by saying, 'if we weren't in the European Union, there would just be nothing, there wouldn't be that playground, there wouldn't be that road, there would just be gravel or something. It would just be different' (211001A_Chrudim).

The students in Poland on the other hand by and large resisted the suggestion that they might identify with the EU. In so far as if the EU is mentioned in positive terms at all, it is mostly because of the opportunity to travel without a visa and the opportunity to work abroad. When encouraged by the interviewers to say something positive about EU citizenship, one young woman says: 'I guess the fact that we don't need passports [to travel]' (211116A_Sandomierz). Such a pragmatic perspective with its guarded articulation of a benefit of EU citizenship was altogether quite rare, however. A girl in the same Polish town clearly demurred when asked about her European identity: 'We talk about Poland every day. We don't mention the EU every day, or every hour, or talk about it more. Most of us only think about passports, and the rest are more attached to Poland' (20211116A_Nowa Ruda). Most students elsewhere agree with her: 'Every person looks more at their nation than at the whole Parliament, at the Community. And he would look more at who is going to govern his country than the whole community of countries in Europe. And that's it' (211116B_Sandomierz). 'We are Poles first, then citizens of the Union' (2021118A_Nowa Ruda). Particularly among the Polish students interviewed, there was some reluctance to identify as European citizens. Some explain why they feel this way. For instance, in Nowa Ruda, a student explained: 'I don't feel any connection with other EU-citizens just because we're in the same EU. I mean, I'm Polish, someone's German, and

we're in the same organization. So what does that change? I mean I really like the fact that we're in the EU because it's easier for us as citizens of Europe, but honestly, what does it change?' (21118A_ Nowa Ruda).

Some Hungarian and Slovak students flatly refused to consider the question. In these interviews, the gist tends to be that there is nothing that connects them with other EU nationals. In Lučenec, a student argues rather wittily: 'I can't even comment on what I think connects us. I guess it's just borders'; they continue: 'it's a completely different culture everywhere, the French live completely differently than the Slovaks, the same goes for the Germans, and it's different in every country' (20210930A_Lučenec). A Karcag student emphasised. 'For me it's not important', he explains: 'I say it's not important because we are such a small country, I think we are fine without the union because we can do everything, before the union and after the union' (20220125B_Karcag). But other students in Karcag argue more pragmatically: 'the EU means national cohesion, an alliance between nations, and this is also reflected, for example, in the Schengen area, where you don't have to use a passport everywhere, you can cross borders with an identity card, and the free movement of goods, products, and capital is also much easier, for example, with other continents where there are no such federal systems. So... the Union essentially makes it easier for us to be European and to have contacts with other countries' (220125A_Karcag). All positive claims in these contexts are highly pragmatic rather than affective; there is not much love lost either for the EU or for other Europeans, or at least, not affection that they feel appropriate to articulate in the context of these interviews. One Karcag student explains that this is because 'the people of Europe are more connected by culture and history than by... the institutional system that we call the European Union' (220125A_Karcag). But though there is not much love lost for the EU institutions or other member states, many Hungarian students express their desire to move within the country in the near future, primarily to attend universities and a majority of the interviewees mentions a strong inclination to move abroad in the longer term. One student explains, 'Because of the very few opportunities, I can't imagine staying here in the future' (220125A_Karcag).

So there is not much ambivalence amongst the students. Those who answer the question as to what European citizenship means to them point to the usefulness in terms of opportunities to migrate that the EU citizenship offers them, but they have no love for the EU nor do they identify in a collective whose institution the EU is. That said, many students did not answer the questions and said they knew too little about the EU. 'I don't know what would happen if we weren't in the European Union.' Another says: 'I don't really know, because I don't care about that stuff. I don't even know what the European Union means, or like I know we're in it, there's like countries in it, right, they might help us, too. But I just sit there and say, yeah, we're in the European Union, great, and what am I supposed to do with it?' One secondary school student argued 'I don't

even know where the European Parliament is.’ Those who admit to little knowledge also assume that the EU has no effect on their lives and that membership in it would make no difference whatsoever.

So, to summarise, many of those interviewed articulated the view that either EU citizenship (about which they often admitted to know little) made no difference to their lives, or that it was primarily useful either because local infrastructure projects might be funded by the EU or it might allow them to migrate at some time in the future. But there is another perspective that was frequently articulated by students: that they were not equal to others, in particular in relation to Western European students.

B. ‘The Iron Curtain didn’t dissolve very well’

The inequality perceived and articulated by the students in our interviews relates to economic and ontological differences. I shall present these in turn. Many students pointed to the relative poverty of their own countries in contrast to Western countries, in particular when they were explaining their desire to migrate: ‘everybody knows that Eastern Europe is quite... not backward, but behind the other half of Europe’, a ‘backward area economically and socially’ (20220113A_Moreni), ‘countries are lagging behind, such as Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, (to) catch up with countries like France or Germany’ (220125A_Karcag). They rate their own countries in negative terms; in terms of standards of living, there are few positive outlooks; they berate the lack of choices for youths and poor infrastructure (they mention health services, public transport, corruption). Migration, then, is not a migration to the West in the sense of ‘ex occidente lux!’, as some have argued (mainly from the West), but a push factor, as they find their expectations for private and public lives likely to be thwarted for those who choose to stay. Thus, Romanian students agreed with the student who said: ‘If we want something else or want to do something with our lives, we can’t do it with the salary we get in Romania’ (220113B_Moreni). Emigration is for them a means to an end. Those who did not want to be left behind all pointed to a future as emigrants (for more details, see Pates 2023). But they did not like not having an option to stay. They resent the stark choices they face. As a Czech student puts it: ‘It seems to me that they just treat the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the smaller countries here as a kind of garbage’ (210921B_Sokolov). A Hungarian student says ruefully: ‘Hungary should not be left behind’ (220125B_Karcag), whilst a Romanian student laments ‘it seems like we’re a bit forgotten by the world’ (220113A_Moreni). What makes their own countries so unattractive is articulated most clearly by a Romanian student. She argues that ‘Eastern Europe’ generally had not become as modern as the rest of the world, because of history somehow... It’s as if this city is stuck in time, somehow’ (20220113A_Moreni). Another student adds: ‘why can’t this

town be fixed? Because the people here are drowning in their own mediocrity. People are, how shall I say, stuck at such a mediocre level of consciousness' (220113A_Moreni). Even though Romania has resources, they are not valued, Romanians are 'stupid' or 'thieves' (220113B_Moreni).

Many more thoughtful students argue that the real problems are historically made, and that the problems are generally between 'the East' and 'the West'. One student goes so far as to say that there are comprehension problems generally between the two Europes: 'only we among ourselves can understand each other, those in the East, because those in the West have not shared our history, let's say' (220113A_Moreni). This fundamental lack of understanding of 'Eastern Europeans' by 'the West' is due to the fact that the Eastern countries are seen by other Europeans as pre-modern, they argue, as well as backward and poor.

This view of the East is at least in part attributed to the dictatorships of the twentieth century: 'Here in Eastern Europe, National Socialism and Socialism were present for many decades, and there is a tradition of this here in Eastern Europe, and it cannot be regulated at the European level, because what is completely unacceptable in Western Europe... was once accepted here' (220125A_Karcag). They see this history as unfortunate, however as one commented: 'I understand that from this European citizenship I gain a certain freedom, but this European citizenship for the citizens of the European Union does not mean much socially speaking. I mean, I won't be treated as an equal in other countries because I have another citizenship underneath my European citizenship and everyone has their own opinion about the citizens of another country' (220113A_Moreni). This is a point that particularly the Romanian students elaborate on without being prompted:

okay, there's a big difference between the western states and the states...not that big, but there's a big difference between the western states and the eastern states, there's a certain behavior that westerners have shown towards us. What could be the reason? We look in history and we realize that there is this difference: in the West there is a great hatred of communism, the Russians were communists, we were communists and we realize where it comes from, but we still remained poor. And nobody helps us (220113A_Moreni).

The lament about inequality is succeeded by a demand, that there be more transfer payments to the East. The economic disadvantage is seen as a grounds for solidarity, rather than, as they see it, a reason to be disparaged. As the political sociologists Patricio Korzeniewicz and Timothy Moran have argued, international migration that entails gaining access to the average lowest deciles can be hugely advantageous if the lowest deciles of the country of immigration is higher than the upper deciles of the country of emigration. If this is the case, international migration becomes the 'single most immediate and effective

means of global social mobility for populations in most countries of the world' (Korzeniowicz – Moran 2009: 107).

So migration solves a number of problems from the perspectives of the students – of relative and absolute poverty, inadequate infrastructure, lack of social and economic mobility – but they rue this fact and would articulate clear resentment of the fact that citizens in Western countries do not face such stark choices. They feel that genuine equality would mean similar life choices, including the choice not to emigrate. So they argue for transfer payments – but realise that these come at a cost. These costs seem to them unfair, a form of modern imperialism even. One Romanian student argues:

I am not saying that it is a bad thing to have two different Europes, it is good to have two different Europes on two levels. Culturally. I think it's very healthy to have that, but economically it's a, it's a big disadvantage. I mean, from what I know and from what projects I've followed (sic) from the European Union, they are trying somehow to make Europe uniform. Like a unification. It's good on some levels, economic, social... The idea is that they are trying to achieve a unification, and a cultural unification which creates a defensive posture somehow, because of history we feel again that we could be controlled and nobody wants that and that's why we slowly lose hope in changing something or equalising from these points of view. (220113A_ Moreni)

Another student chimes in: 'I think that this theme of culture can be emphasised, because my personal impression of the European Union is that it is trying to standardise not only economically but also culturally, which I think is very wrong, it seems to me that they want to diminish culture, especially Eastern culture. That seems to me to be the point, and it can be emphasised' (220113A_ Moreni). Also the Czech debates took a dark turn: 'I think lately it's really been more of a dictate... that the European Union is telling the countries what to do, that it's clearly above them' (211001A_Chрудim). All these students see the imposition of EU norms and values as the payment exerted for their relative poverty, and feel that the price that they have to pay as a country is too high: an imposition that affects their own values and norms and is an attempt to wipe out Romanian, Polish, Hungarian or Czech culture. In fact, they explain that what they experience from the West is an attempt to assimilate Eastern cultures to the West, as if the EU was unwilling or unable to tolerate cultural differences: 'the idea is that they are trying to achieve a unification, and a cultural unification which creates a defensive posture somehow' (220113A_ Moreni).

These laments of inequality are however not equally distributed across the interviews. It is striking to what degree the feelings of inequality expressed by Romanian students in particular differs from the perspectives of our interviews in Poland, where the students portray themselves much more confidently as

members of a society of solidarity amongst equals: ‘So, if I’m going to work, I’m going to work for other citizens of the European Union, also from outside our country. That’s how I look at it. So, I will work for others, and others for me. A kind of symbiosis’ (211118A_ Nowa Ruda). Whilst the Romanian students emphasise that taking financial aid from the EU comes at too high a cost, and that they are not treated as equals either collectively or individually when they work in Germany (where they recount that others have experienced racism), Polish students see themselves more in a symbiotic relationship with other Europeans, a metaphor from biology suggesting that every state in the EU, and every individual in the state, have different functions that they take up and though the roles might not be equal, they are equally important.

To Summarise

Whilst EU citizenship is a ‘liminal’ form of citizenship, one of its aims has been to establish, or at least suggest, equality amongst European citizens. Our research project held interviews with adolescents in six CEE countries in secondary and vocation schools. Whilst some students – namely in Poland and Slovakia – articulate that they are members of a circle of solidarity and share the aims of the EU, others – notably Hungarian and Romanian students – see EU citizenship provisions pragmatically, as a way to ease the project of migration, but would prefer to stay in their own areas of origin if they were just not so peripheral in economic, social and infrastructural terms. Neither perspective cherishes EU citizenship as they do their national citizenships. Many chafe at the sense of inequality. And this is a problem – as one of the most promising aspects of citizenship as the linchpin of democratic order is its dynamic quality, enabling subjects as claimants, as the social scientist Engin Isin has argued (2013: 21). EU citizenship as enacted (by which Isin means that citizenship is the result of certain activities by the citizen) is distinguished from citizenship as arranged (meaning that citizenship is the result of activities by people acting in and for institutions). There are various acts through which European citizenship may be performed or enacted:

When people mobilise for legalising same-sex marriage, rally for public housing, advocate decriminalisation of marijuana or ecstasy for medical uses, wear attire such as head-scarves in public spaces, campaign for affirmative action programmes, demand better health-care access and services, demonstrate against austerity measures, seek disability provisions, protest against government or corporate policies and lodge court cases, they do not often imagine let alone express themselves as struggling for the maintenance or expansion of social, cultural or sexual citizenship... people do not often mobilise and rise for abstract or universal ideal. (ibid.: 21–22)

Isin is arguing that citizenship is lived experience, an activity that happens on a meta-level, as an unintended consequence of political activities, whilst people are interpolating their citizenship rights and the attendant claims to equality. It is notable that none of the students interviewed in our research was enacting European citizenship in the sense here explained, but of course, there are young and from peripheralised areas, where political expression may not take the forms that it does in urban areas.

If we accept that citizenship is enacted, and that it expresses itself in performed subject positions, Isin deduces that European citizenship too is a question of enacted subject positions, a way of relating to others either as equal citizens or unequal outsiders:

We can then define European citizenship broadly as a relational (political, legal, social and cultural but perhaps also sexual, aesthetic and ethical) institution of domination and emancipation that governs who European citizens (insiders), strangers, outsiders and objects (aliens) are and how these European subjects are to govern themselves and each other in that space constituted as Europe. So European citizenship is not only membership in a state. It is a relationship that governs the conduct of the (subject) positions that constitute it. (Isin 2013: 26)

Thus, European citizenship does not merely denote a status, but a range of activities that constitute the citizenry as a performed subjectivity, and which citizens may – or, as we have seen in the case of the students here described – may not engage in. As non-citizens can and do engage in these activities, and as not all citizens engage in them, it seems that enacted and institutionalised citizenships are then two categories that refer to similar but not the same kinds. They are not exactly overlapping phenomena. This is an artefact not only of European citizenships, but of identities generally. And it has effects on how identities can be studied. They can be analysed in *deductive* terms: there are certain basic political-philosophical principles on the basis of which one may call a person a European citizen, and a correct understanding of how (the appropriate set of) these principles can be used to deduce the appropriate set of labelling and identifications of a person as a European citizen. Identities can also be analysed in *inductive* terms. Here, the way people see or enact EU citizenship transmutes into more general models of what EU citizenship *is*, and ought to be. Third, we can take the approach that citizenship is *enacted*: that varied subjects enact or embody interpretations of favoured principles, and that what we call democracy in a given time and place is the contingent outcome of a particular understanding of which subjects enacting which principles matter most.

One result of this research has been that equality might *deductively* be part of European citizenship, because equality is what the institution seeks to achieve or suggest, but *inductively* it is hard to find, as some citizens – the CEE youth,

amongst others, interviewed in this project – argue with some verve. The equality they seek is differentiated on different scales: economic, social, political and identitarian. On an economic scale, the students discuss local deindustrialisation, low levels of innovation, and the prevalence of badly paid, insecure, low skilled work. On a social scale, they discuss the local levels of poverty and the high rates of emigration. Politically, they see the dependence of their regions from the national centres and the European West, and they articulate their feelings of exclusion from the demos. And finally, what I have focused on here, they discuss the identitarian aspects of their inequality, and with the exception of individual Polish and Slovak students, many express their feeling of not being equal to the West, neither in the life options nor in terms of equality of treatment, should they choose to move West.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the gracious anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on this text, which have made it a great deal better.

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