

NEW MEDIA AS A CATALYST OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY

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Abstract: *The European Union continuously endeavors to submit to an integrative framework which support the formation of a European spirit and identity. Among the accelerating factors, new media stands for a catalyst of European integration, online networks supporting the users to share opinions, experiences, information, etc. The interactivity provided by new media allow Europeans to learn more about each other and to discover similar or subsidiary objectives. Here, the paper aims to investigate the role of new media in the reconfiguration of social relationships which encompass a shared identity. To this end, several in-depth interviews were conducted with active users who are anchored in online European debates. As the findings showed, new media facilitate people's engagement in virtual relations and supports the creation of social groups with similar values and standpoints on the European constructs.*

Keywords: new media; European identity; citizenship; public sphere

Introduction

The development of new media is more influenced by economic factors than the old media. Technologically advanced economies are in the action of moving towards information-based economies, leaving behind industrial capitalism (Freeman and Soete, 1997; Piketty, 2014). New media expands national boundaries, the traditional barriers being crossed towards intercultural communication - the Internet fosters concessions, permission and freedom, English being the *lingua franca* of the Internet just as it is now for many individuals the international language for business (Morley and Robins, 1995; Kramarae, 1999).

The emergence of online innovations has become the subject of several debates, highlighting the role of technology in reinforcing the quality of the public sphere and thus democracy (Coleman, 1999; De Vreese, 2003; Jakubowicz, 2012).

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The growth of the platforms of new media such as blogs or social networks is undeniable. The occurrence of new media driven by interconnectivity has brought the expectation of the revival of public sphere, linked to democracy (Poster, 1999). There is an authentic connection between public interest and media since new media include both information and interactivity; more precisely they set down the feedback of virtual visitors and they cover future issues considering the public's grievance (Stroeker *et al.*, 2014). A majority of scientists interested in the European Union assert that there is a need for further democratization to prevent legitimacy future problems of the European governance (Zürn, 2000; von Bogdandy, 2007). Greater support for active citizenship would certainly diminish the deficits of legitimacy (Walkenhorst, 2008). Nevertheless, Kaina and Karolewski (2013, p.9) assume in the European case, a "dilemma of simultaneity" as a consequence of the interdependence that exists in improving democratic quality and defining conditions for the cultivation of the European identity. More precisely, the authors describe that the European governance needs the support of its peoples, and their attachment to EU policies is determined by a more democratic system; a higher degree of democracy comes with the risk of legitimacy difficulties, caused by the lack of a vital common identity.

In this vein, focusing on the usage of new media within the boundaries of the European Union, it should be stressed that the EU communication policy is not established by specific rules from treaties; it stems directly from the obligation of explaining the functioning, the politics of the European Union and even the understanding of European integration to the public. The need for an operative communication has the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union as legal basis, which guarantees the right of being informed for all the European citizens. The primary objective of the European communication policy is promoting trust in the European project and the gradual configuration of a European identity (Pagden, 2002; Delanty, 2005; Cataldo, 2014). Still, additional new media support the overall communication, ranging from online institutional channels to online social networks which are merely informal.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims at investigating the role of new media in the formation and consolidation of a European spirit which encompasses a shared identity and the openness to becoming part of a whole at the same time. To this end, the paper is structured as follows: firstly, the theoretical section approaches two main research directions, namely the European identity as an ongoing process and new media and the EU public sphere; secondly, the methodological section describes the research design (participants, procedure, measures); thirdly, the empirical section brings to the fore the results derived from twenty in-depth interviews which were conducted with active users in online European debates.

The underlying assumption is that an active online presence within the framework of European debates catalyzes the European identity and identification to a great extent.

1. Literature review

1.1. The European identity as an ongoing process

Public opinion and public political communication can be viewed as public participation and as ways of determining political decision-making and action. According to Peters (2005), a political community has to detain as precondition a common, legitimate and democratic political order. European citizens need to trust European institutions and those who create legislative order inasmuch as the sense of justice includes commitment to equal positioning of persons within the European political order, and solidarity (Condor, 2012; Føllesdal, 2014). The skeptical objections of the European Union insist on the feeble collective identity and a truly missing European public sphere. The basis of the political community must be discussed freely at national channels and in pan-European forums as long as European identity should not be defined through the exclusion of national identity, but rather as an extension of the prime identity assumed (Stiftung, 2013). Collective identity involves coherence and cohesion; which have to be accomplished by individuals, and it is sustained through time – by shared traditions- and across space –by defining the concept of inclusion and exclusion- (Morley and Robins, 1995, p.72). Public discourse is considered part of the public sphere, which has the connotation of a delimited social space of communication, where the public transmutes into a community (Peters, 2005). The European public sphere is consolidating around particular problems which are supported by all its citizens, such as anti-war pleadings or environmental catastrophes. Eliminating social, political, and economical differences is the precondition of collective identity that should have as foundation freedom and human rights; assurances of attachment and reciprocity (Kaina and Karolewski, 2013). The process of homogenization of regional groupings can be assumed through the reduction of the discrepancy between members of the same community, inasmuch as the interest is to avoid the creation of an artificial collective identity (Anderson, 1991; Wendt, 1994; Walkenhorst, 2008).

As far as the identity construction is concerned, political elites dispose of the context and the power to share interests, display preferences and define changes, but the outcome depends on how conceptions about Europe resonate with already constructed identities (Risse and Engelmann-Martin, 2002, p.293). As a societal identity is sustained by discursive elements rather than pre-established cultural foundation so is the view of European identity: concerned with communicative power (Delanty, 2005, p.140). Social identities claim the membership of an individual to a certain group, but individuals hold many social identities, which reveal that the evaluative components of a human being are the base to decide group's affiliation (Turner, 1987; Abrams and Hogg, 1990). In Condor's (2012) research, he ascertains that the potential adoption of the European identity is also a matter of attitude: citizens who approve European membership are more likely to conceive or import, and ultimately maintain, European spirit. Collective identity can be studied at a micro level through the eye of the European individual in terms



of emotional component, putting a focus on the individual and his feelings of belonging to a certain group, presenting a community internally and externally (Cerutti, 2008). A common “enemy” would enhance the concept of European citizenship and foster the feeling of belonging to a certain community, encouraging common European political and social projects (Stiftung, 2013). According to Kaina and Karolewski (2013, p.28) the manifestation of the European identity is influenced by every individual predispositions (experiences, attitudes, resources) and by contextual factors (cultural, institutional and process-related); which in the end can strengthen or weaken each individual’s desire of being part of an active community.

At this level, the creation of the European Union and the progressive integration of the member states have brought into question the existence of European identity (Pagden, 2002). A political union can be created as a structure where citizens agree on matters that concern them all, such as security, defense, welfare or communications, ignoring the origins of the people who lead them all. Pagden (2002) sustains that, within the European Union, the communality between state and culture would be a hindrance to the political union, the plurality conceives unity – *e pluribus unum* – and because culture is assumed to be constantly evolving, it is supposed to have the same capacity for self-reflection exactly as citizenship (Tully, 1995). Individuals’ allegiances to the importance of sharing common problems and of working together by pursuing common goals for a better future could be a background for we-feelings, construed as a condition for authentic cooperation (Kaina and Karolewski, 2013, p. 5; Stiftung, 2013; Bachofer, 2014). Beyond the political and economic aspects, the European Union must create a set of symbols – generator of demos - that have the power to transcend self-regarding regional identities and to inspire collective enthusiasm (D’Appollonia, 2002, p. 190; Stanley, 2013, p. 11; Bachofer, 2014, p. 19). The European identity can be assumed firstly, if all the social, cultural and psychic barriers are removed and secondly, if the principles of solidarity are implemented (Morley and Robins, 1995, p. 84). Pursuant to Walkenhorst (2008), for a supra-state-building, the implementation of a European Constitution is necessary and it is imperative to establish media systems and institutions in order to inoculate social security, income adjustment, tax payment and supranational regulations.

The European identity should not be defined only from the perspective of cultural and political identity, based on people and tradition; a proposal is made to see identity in a socio-cognitive form, constituted of an assemblage of evaluation, discursive practices, a plurality of identity projects which can be interpreted as a “dialogic identity” (Delanty, 2005, p.128).

Along with the enlargement of the European Union, a plurality of identities emerges, which will result in a new expression of the European identity (Fuchs and Klingemann, 2002). Identities are constantly transforming; they are not simply given, they are constructed and permanently changing with the extension of the European Union, involving a distinction between insiders and outsiders; in this respect, group identity refers to collective consciousness, belonging and group attachments (Delanty, 2005, p. 129; Frunzaru *et al.*, 2011, p. 27). Delanty (2005)

considers that, in essence, the European identity stands for a cosmopolitan identity and not for a supranational identity that transcends national identities. National identities are not expected to be abandoned by European peoples, but their reduction is necessary in favor of the European identity, in the logic of constructivism (Bachofer, 2014, p. 24). The European identity is always in progress, it cannot occur as a spontaneous will of a group or institution; it is articulated in time, through a continuous debate within the European public structures (Morley and Robins, 1995; Frunzaru *et al.*, 2011).

There are several reasons to create and to preserve common values among European Union for the sake of the International community advancement. Three of them are mentioned by Føllesdal (2014): the restraint of some member states interests in the benefit of others; the obedience of the losers in decision-making; and negotiating treaties must have a supranational concernment. Culture plays a main role in how the European Union is apprehended, delivering a suite of shared rules, values, and positive expectations (Stroeker *et al.*, 2014). Habermas (1991) has pointed out that even if democratic citizenship is not driven by national identity of the people, in spite of the plurality of cultural forms, it requires a socialization of individuals in a mutual political culture. Collective memories, transfigured in commitments and collective projects or responsibilities, emanated from the past, can unite the present to future collaboration (Peters, 2005; Walkenhorst, 2008). For most of the European citizens, their state integration means freedom of learning, travelling or working in other member states, and for fewer individuals the European Union symbolizes the guarantee for idealistic and historical values such as democracy or cultural diversity (Kenny, 2004; Walkenhorst, 2008, p. 15). Føllesdal (2014) appraises that special components of collective identity must be the trust in each other and loyalty, which does not necessarily imply other cooperative values, whereas the shared motivation might be the incentive of a common identity. Bachofer (2014) argues that, for group identity, two factors are determinant: the spatial factor - includes symbols and values that transcend national boundaries via the discourse in a public sphere- and the temporal factor – a civilization mechanism is built in time, not instantly. In the future, the European Union may evolve into a multinational public sphere, leaving behind the geographical and political structure. The contradiction between individualism and the nation-state teleology unravels through a collective identity; the degree of individualism is maintained in the circle of the formed structure and the practical politics have a double character: enabling and also constraining the possibilities of individualism and identification (Herzfeld, 2002).

The reflexive identity of any individual contains the capacity to build a community that by participation becomes able to form common opinions and unique enactment, having as a result the success of a public sphere, which transcends the boundaries of a single nation (Kaina and Karolewski, 2013). *Per a contrario*, Condor (2012) remarks that theoretically, governance of a polity does not always depend upon the reflexive consciousness of the citizens involved. Nonetheless, Dean (cited in Condor, 2012) sustains that, in liberal democratic European countries, political legitimation relies on people attending, assuming an active role, not just the role of



passive subjects. From Walkenhorst's (2008) point of view, the collective European identity construction should be administered as a project type: different speeds of integration, sub-group formation or, in some cases, the exclusion of state members that do not affiliate with the European community. The European Union has an asymmetric figure, regarded as a federation and it increases the insistent request for a shared identity, but it also generates the prospect of a real European sphere, where conceptions are commutable (Føllesdal, 2014).

Peoples do not relinquish their cultural, normative and political perspectives in order to replace them with other that cannot be counted as a higher class; they will act correspondingly in case they are given the hope of a lighter future, of an improved quality of life (Pagden, 2002). The emergence of a successful European political culture supposes the presence of three conditions: (1) a cultural program able to generate a new allegiance; (2) the evanescence of the confusion between sovereignty and identity and (3) the increase of the accessibility of the European Union for its members (D'Appollonia, 2002, p.189). The key is a public sphere providing sufficient information and transparency of political decisions and a concurrence of ideas and arguments that can give a chance to democratic participation (Peters, 2005; Kaina and Karolewski, 2013). Public deliberation is in fact a "collaborative argumentative effort" to obtain solutions to different topics put in discussion; to a certain degree, a reflective examination generates the understanding and the respect for converse positions (Peters, 2005, p.104). In this manner, collaboration gives a possible answer and the political decisions are marked by a degree of legitimacy.

1.2. New media and the EU public sphere

With the support of new media, public communication is accessible without restrictions or special conditions for participating. Nobody has an interdiction of expressing views, all the persons are free to listen, to read, to speak and actively participating to any debate. In mass media, entertainment programs and reporting news prevail, but in electronic media there are different types of news comments, news magazines and other documents providing a substantial amount of opinions and deliberative content, defined as parasocial encounters (Peters, 2005; Kaina and Karolewski, 2013; Dumitriu, 2014). A public culture facilitates public discourse, influences the ways of understanding and directs attention to common issues, having as a primary purpose constructing agendas of future applications in the community realms.

Pursuant to Jakubowicz (2012), mediated communication can be asynchronous (non-linear) on account of time-shifting and place-shifting, suitable to mobile media. The author talks about the possibility of networked communication to combine all types of communication: one-to-one communication; one-to-few communication; group communication; mass personal communication (one-to-many); mass-self communication (self-expression) and general communication (many-to-many). All interactive conversations are governed by allocation. New actors have assumed services in the distribution

operation of media functions which had been assured only by traditional media institutions; including content aggregators and users who, at the same time, produce content.

For the European citizens, the opportunity for active participation through new media, using formal –European official sites- and informal ways- social media-, is a chance of identifying with the real European identity. Conveying information to a mass audience means transferring symbols and beliefs, which are not imported immediately in people’s minds, but in a “two-step flow communication”, after being discussed and criticized especially by opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 2009). Expressing ideas and proposing topics of discussion become an effective way of contributing to the European social construction - “What is required is a vision of a political and social order that is more just and economically, culturally, intellectually, and aesthetically more compelling than the order currently prevailing in any of the independent nation-states” (Pagden, 2002, p.20).

The European public sphere is liable to foster a universe of collaboration and shared discourse, due to the flows of ideas which may be mutually adjusted, enhancing the European spirit. Peters (2005) talks about another form of transnational communication, that consists of the import and export of cultural products such as: books, films, press products, print and electronic media. Even a European song contest has the power of spreading different national cultures and promotes inter-subjectivity (Bachofer, 2014, p.40). Discursive transformation emphasizes a socio-cognitive transformation that surpasses the close context and offers learning potential (Delanty, 2005). Collective nation-states identities incorporate the selection and implementation of ideas and cognitive strategies.

For individuals with Internet access and with willingness to communicate, new media are a priceless resource for political participation. The engagement in political discourse guarantees engagement in pre-established themes and serves as a potential equalizer for all the communicators involved (Cataldo, 2014). In facilitating public discourse by involving a third party, audience integration and reach are increased, thus expanding the impact of civic collaboration (Peters, 2005; Cataldo, 2014).

From 2012, the citizenship initiative is a new form of communication, introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon, which permits to citizens to directly propose the elaboration of new legislative documents for the European Union. The introduction of this initiative allows the emergence of a wider and stronger point of view regarding the European legislation and development. The European democracy registers a new dimension, which enlarges the set of rights referring to European citizens. Public deliberation augments and it gives contribution to a sterling European public sphere as viewable on the official website of the European Parliament (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/>). The European Commission issued documents concerning the relation between European institutions and the public, which are lead by three principles: public consultation; the influence of people’s lives through European policies and contact establishment with citizens through most preferred mass media (European Parliament, 2015).



The official site of European Parliament presents the principles initiatives for EU communication: the program “Europe for citizens”, which has as purposes civic participation, European memory and the active implication of the civil society; “The Partnership for European communication”, preoccupied with the understanding of the European policies; Communication on Europe themes through the Internet; “Debating Europe”- a forum of online discussions-, “Communicating Europe through Audiovisual Media”, Presseurop - a multilingual news portal with press articles that, according to Stroeker *et al.* (2014), was closed at the end of 2013. The purpose of these tools is to contribute to a more solid coverage of European affairs by encouraging the emergence of a networked European society.

The European document released in 2007 “Communicating Europe in Partnership” has emerged as a strategy connoting European Union institutions and the member states, which aimed to improve communication policy, empowering citizens to develop the valid European public sphere (Stroeker *et al.*, 2014). Nevertheless, in practice, the activities that are organized do not succeed to persuade ordinary citizens or scholars because a public discourse has to assign two parts: the speaker and the involved-receiver; the monologue has to be surpassed by dialogue (Stroeker *et al.*, 2014, p. 43).

European citizens have access through the website of the European Commission (2015) to the “EU citizenship portal” that offers both informative and participative tools and sections such as “Your Europe”, “Europe Direct” “Citizen's initiatives” “Your voice in Europe”, “Citizens' dialogues”, “Integration” allowing information requests, advise requests, addressing complaints, lunching initiatives, public debates and so on. Although the member states have created bodies responsible for setting up the dialogue with local communities, there is a deficit in understanding the engagement furtherance and how public groups should be implicated in different Europeanization activities (Thiel, 2008).

The European Justice portal (2015) is also representative for the access to the domain of laws and regulations and it contains legislation, jurisprudence, judicial systems, juridical professions and legal networks, juridical assistance, judicial procedures and mediation, civil and criminal procedures. The official sites have the possibility for registration and receiving newsletters frequently.

The EuroparlTV website has become an area of public interest, where there are posted videos on different European topics: terrorism, finance, agriculture, economy, consumers’ rights, energy, migration, border control etc. Through EuroparlTV, the wide public has access to live parliamentary sessions and the user has also the option of expressing the feedback by sending email to “eptv@europarl.europa.eu”. The web page EuroparlTV is interlocked to social sites such as Twitter and Facebook and to the applications Dailymotion and YouTube. The evaluation of EUROPA website, conducted in 2008 by Ernst & Young, shows that the website is usually used by students and administration employees and more than 60% of the users visit the website weekly (Ernst & Young, cited in Stroeker *et al.*, 2014, p. 47).

In the informational society, citizens seek to be informed, to obtain necessary documents and to pay their taxes and fines from the home or office

computer. The European Commission has its Digital Agenda that popularizes the benefits driven by informational technology and communications in all European societies (Cataldo, 2014).

Access to public information is essential to eradicate corruption and the gain of public confidence in the European governance. The website of the European Parliament confers citizens a large area of public information to promote the ideal of government transparency. Cataldo (2014) advocates for a site that can be dedicated to all the European citizens: ordinary people, journalists, lobbyists, lawyers, researchers. However, after an official site assessment, the website “Parliament and You” was generated, comprising the following sections: information; petition forms; cooperation and transparency, which tries to dispose audience (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/atyourservice/ro>). The European Parliament gives direct access to most of its documents in electronic format. The European Parliament is more oriented to consensus, since it is directly elected by European citizens and it is defined as the expression of people’s voice and the only direct democratic institution (Kaina and Karolewski, 2013, p.11).

The European Commission is the principal actor on the European area, through its legislative proposals, its role as counselor of the European policies implementation, militant of supranational behalves and manager of communication (Stroeker *et al.*, 2014, p.44). European Commission uses certain social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Google+Icon, YouTube, etc. because these communication channels are more often used by EU citizens than traditional channels such as print, television stations or EU publications. Furthermore, social sites are liable to stimulate citizens’ engagement in social and political European life and in addition to information and promoting policies, social media is a way of designing responsibilities and sharing experiences (Stroeker *et al.*, 2014) On websites such as “<http://ec.europa.eu>”, policies, legislative procedures are communicated to the public and there are also organized consultations for establishing political priorities. The purpose of this kind of communication is relaying official announcements, press releases and statements in a consistent and coherent manner. Besides informing citizens and promoting policies and campaigns, the goal of this type of communication includes sharing experiences and engaging stakeholders (Bargaoanu and Negrea, 2011). European Commission resorts to tools and services from third parties such as specialized sites (www.opcom.ro; www.ancom.org.ro, Google Analytics, Statscounter), blogs or social networks due to the continuous flow of users, but this involves certain risks such as privacy and data protection, persistent cookies, accuracy of information and Internet security risks The Council of the European Union system of communication is decided by the European Union presidency, and as a consequence, the techniques and the degrees of communication are established by every country that holds the presidency (De Vreese, 2003).

The European coordination systems are essential in managing European policies at national level, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs having the main role to ensure decision-making authorities intercommunication. In Romania, the primary role exercised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is to coordinate daily activities



(Jinga, 2008, p.120), which is reflected by receiving and disseminating all European materials from the center of the EU – Brussels. Jinga (2008) deems that the role of the Department of European bilateral relations, integrated in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, must be redefined due to the fact that the information detained about the European actors -lobbyists from the member states, line ministries and their counterparts from other countries- has to be augmented. In Romania, efforts are being made with the aim to keep citizens informed about the European Union affairs and policies, but in the same time, with the exception of comments posted on social sites, a specialized forum misses from the Romanian scene. An official interactive forum would be the most appropriate for free debates and for facilitating the understanding of the whole European system. As example, a graphic portal that allows Romanians to contribute to European debates is EurActiv.ro, which facilitates the wide dissemination of information and provides active participation (Stroecker *et al.*, 2014, p. 58).

The European Union is willing to promote the development and dissemination of new technologies, encouraging their use in business and institutional environments and supporting that all citizens (applicants, clients and service producers) have unlimited access to the network. Still, new media are the main channels through which information can be widely disseminated, but their capitalization is still incipient. This involves that every European citizen, regardless of age, social, political or economic background, may access and use the available online channels to become a content receiver, catalyzer or creator.

2. Purpose and research questions

The present paper aims to investigate the role of new media in the formation and consolidation of a European spirit which encompasses a shared identity and the openness to becoming part of a whole. Against this backdrop, several research questions were formulated: a. Do subjects see the European Union in terms of unity, commonness or similarity?; b. What is their main reason for debating Europe?; c. How is new media catalyzing the feeling of identification with individuals from other EU states?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Participants

20 active users of European new media (aged between 20 and 57) answered to an interview-based survey. The participants were selected using a snowball sampling. Also, the participants were chosen taking into account their availability to talk about their standpoints regarding the European Union, the advantages of being informed and of choosing the suitable communication channels.

3.2. Procedure

In order to generate detailed and in-depth descriptions of the participants' experiences we chose to use phenomenological interviews. The interviewees' observations, perceptions and understandings were investigated by employing a semi-structured in-depth interview based on open-ended questions. This option catalyzed the opportunity to discuss some topics in a more detailed manner and the descriptions were further explored through 'probes'. We considered individual interviews more valuable to provide detailed information about the meaning of the situations and of the social contexts to each participant in the setting.

The interviews comprised 11 main questions (supported by additional clarifications) and were conducted online during April 2015. Questions were posed in a relaxed informal manner so that the interview appeared more like a discussion or conversation. The respondents were explained the purpose of the interview and were encouraged to co-operate. Still, they were not given too much detail that would have biased their responses. The objective was to uncover the widest range of meanings held by the participants in the setting. The respondents were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity in the aggregated findings.

The structure of the interview followed Seidman's (1998) three-phase qualitative interview: focused life history (the respondents' experiences were put in context, by asking them to provide as much information as possible about themselves, in relation to the topic of the study); the details of experience (concrete details of their present experience in the research topic area); reflection on the meaning (reflection on the meaning of their experience, how they make intellectual and emotional connections with the experiences that are the subject of the research topic). The answers to the interviews were categorized by carrying out a thematic analysis as a systematic way of identifying all the main concepts which arose in the interviews, and of developing them into common themes.

3.3. Measures

The analysis was focused on several key issues: 1) the users' representations of the European Union, 2) their approaches on the European citizenship, 3) their attitudes towards being informed about the EU dynamics and 4) the drivers for addressing new media when searching for relevant information about EU.

4. Findings and discussion

For the majority of respondents, EU involves the idea of unity, commonness or similarity. *"To me, the European Union is a supranational community, an active organism which continues to develop. It is a link to other European states and a guarantee of sustainable development"* (George, 28, English teacher). Similarly, Cristian (20, student) speaks about *„a union with high expectations and democratic views. It is a vivid structure which promises to ascertain a higher level to the freedom of speech and to human mind emancipation"*. Delia (45, trainer) deems that *"describing*



EU is a never-ending story in terms of political, cultural, economic views – it is always changing, readjusting, still it offers a common sense to more peoples”. Only one subject considers that EU stands for “an air of diversity, plurality in a disguised monoculture frameworks” (Madalina, 32, faculty lecturer).

Most of the subjects acknowledge their status as European citizens, although different viewpoints have been underscored. *“I know I may officially describe myself as a European citizen and I also feel like one, especially when I am travelling abroad and when I am taking advantage of my European rights - in running my business” (Vlad, 25, marketing manager).* Likewise, Alexandra (30, lawyer) mentions that there are moments when she feels *“more European than ever. When Romanian institutions fail in making justice, I find support in European institutions and special services, for example, the Ombudsman”.* Several respondents (3 out of 20) have insisted on “a twofold identity approach”, consisting of the European and national frames of reference. In this vein, Teodor (42, engineer) gives voice to the main ideas attached to the issue *“I am well aware of my dual identity (Romanian and European), but I am more fond of my European identity when I engage in professional collaborations with other faraway cultures, like the Chinese, Americans, etc.”.*

For most of the questioned individuals, Europe and, implicitly, EU stands for *“easier means to achieve supranational goals, independent of their nature, but, basically, I am referring to social or economic facilitation” (Vlad, 25, marketing manager).* In a more articulated manner, Elena (53, teacher) stresses that EU *“is all these and more. It is a catalyst for collective development, a support for the disadvantaged and an optimistic entity striving for a common direction”.* Still, four respondents have embraced unidimensional approaches, choosing only one dominant variable. For example, to George (28, English teacher), *“Europe is above all a geographical location and, which gives you a catching feeling of common identity”.* Also, Daria (28, PhD candidate) states that *“When I say Europe, I inherently think to the European Union, to the idea of a larger community, with similar or even common goals, expectations and future perspectives. I do not think traditions define Europe”.* A fact which is worth mentioning is that none of the respondents mentioned the euro currency as a bonding factor. Moreover, the euro adoption is seen as *“a menace to the community well-being as the disparities between different European regions are too severe to be controlled” (Adela, 47, economist).*

All respondents acknowledge that being informed is the key to easier solutions in all the fields, not only when it comes to the European Union. As Cristian (20, student) posit *“information is power and ignorance entails involution”.* Similarly, Alexandra (30, lawyer) explains that *“being informed about the EU is somehow a condition for knowing and applying our legal rights on different occasions – sometimes, not knowing the things which would support you in your endeavors generates disturbing failures. Everyone should understand we have the obligation to know in order to benefit from our rights”.* Daria (28, PhD candidate) confirms the general trend, stressing that *“I am very interested in accessing information about EU with a view to explore varied professional perspectives or future job employment promises. It is important to find out relevant information about everything that may influence my life: economy, law, and environment”.*

As most of the answers point out, the subjects are familiar with the European institutions and general policies, but they usually lay emphasis on specific issues in accordance with their interests, jobs, fields of activity. *“As a lawyer, I have to be informed about legal matters, about changes and adjustments. This is a must...”* (Alexandra, 30). Moreover, Madalina (32, faculty lecturer) confesses that *“the familiarity with the European institutions is mandatory if you teach these issues to your students, if keeping pace with Europe is part of your job description”*. Several subjects (8 of 20) assert that their interest in the European institutions and laws has begun once they understood their practical influence. For example, Oana (43, financial consultant) mentioned that *“in order to assist my clients about accessing European funds, I need to consistently update my information and to know the basic mechanisms”*. Hereafter, Andrei (30, entrepreneur) marks out that he is a *“loyal observant of regional disparities and of their impact on business development. My family owns a business in the agriculture field and I am consistently looking for new information on European funds and facilities”*.

As far as the EU communication is concerned, most respondents prefer the informal channels because *“they are more interactive, people with similar interests give voice to similar problems and solutions”* (Vlad, 25, marketing manager). Likewise, Andreia (41, Postdoctoral researcher) believed that *“even if EU supports a coherent formal communication through its institutions - for example, the European Parliament and the European Commission have official web pages informing all citizens about the European operations and progress - I find other channels more resourceful. However structured and well-organized official communication might seem, sometimes it is quite difficult to find exactly what you are looking for”*. The same view is shared by Victor (37, clerk) who is keen on *“debating Europe”* on blogs and forums – *“although formal communication is more desirable in terms of accuracy and actuality, I enjoy talking with peers more. The power of common interests is the most compelling incentive”*.

Respondents have systematically confirmed that they are open to various communication channels among which official websites, new media and television are most mentioned (most of them using English as a common language). Here, Adela (47, economist) comments: *“I usually resort to the official specialized sites of the European institutions in order to avoid the lack of information or errors in communication. Except these, I sometimes watch TV programs about EU, but they get me bored very quickly”*. Similarly, Magda (35, engineer) points out that *“accurate information stems from credible sources. I always look for reliable information, thus I prefer formal websites. I don’t want to lose precious time skimming through amateur opinions”*.

Still, almost all the subjects admit the attractiveness of new media whenever they try to found out more about specific EU-related issues. The general trend is articulated through the words of George (28, English teacher): *“New media are quite attractive because, beside remote opinions or fragmentary information, you may find useful data or qualitative details on focused topics”*. Furthermore, Andreia (41, Postdoctoral researcher) considers that *“the most interactive media is social media because lots of European politicians have Twitter or Facebook accounts and you may follow brand-new commentaries on European topics. I totally enjoy seeing*



controversial approaches and the so-called philosophy in action". A moderate position is expressed by Oana (43, financial consultant) who assumes the primary role of new media from the interactivity standpoint. Still, *"browsing social media should be an additive endeavor, not an exclusive one; one should also consider the official pages of European representative institutions where various resources are at your disposal - you may ask for specialized advice or make different petitions. A new generation of two-way formal communication blossoms"*.

Another important idea which emerged from the interviews is that *"new media are more interesting because we have the chance to find out different people's opinions on a European matter. It is quite exciting that someone from the Czech Republic, for example, has the same problem and is looking for the same solutions"* (Andrei, 30, entrepreneur). In the same light, Alexandra (30, lawyer) finds *"new media as a genuine source of inspiration. The legal experiences of other lawyers, from other EU countries, is frequently a step forwards and a showcase for acting correspondingly. As informed as we may pretend to be, we still need some help in our daily routine"*. Additionally, Viviana (57, legal adviser) mentions that *"I was somehow forced to resort to new media when official sources failed in providing me with coherent answers. Although it may seem frustrating, I found a suitable answer for most of my EU-related legal doubts on forums and, which is more, legal advisers from other EU countries helped me understand"*.

As far as the frequency of accessing EU information is concerned, the great majority of respondents (18 out of 20) use to search for novel information at least twice a month. There are cases where there is a *"slight addiction to debate on topic-focused forums, especially when Romanian representatives try to hide the ugly truth from the citizens, mystifying the conclusions of the European Commission, for instance"* (Adela, 47, economist). Moreover, Delia (45, trainer) underscores that *"many times, I feel that I have the opportunity to know Europe better through the voices of its citizens who are simultaneously concerned or content, indifferent of their nationalities, cultures, beliefs, etc. We are unitive in our expectations"*. Cristian (20, student) shares this viewpoint, reporting that *"I engage in debates whenever a certain matter catches my interest. This happens 2 times per week, on average. I am fond of public debates because they are a source of collective solutions"*. Andreia (41, Postdoctoral researcher) admits that she prefers virtual platforms like "Debating Europe" because *"they give you the chance to interact, discuss, share, comment, to feel important despite your anonymity. This would be a good place to revive the European seminal public sphere as users come from all EU states"*.

New media and online participation are not only useful in building a common sense or spirit for the EU citizens, but also for well-defined purposes: *"I deem that e-platforms are useful for me - as a European citizen - because I can find support in understanding policies and regulations which initially, in those hard legal terms, seem somehow encoded. I usually find here a place for public consultation"* (Victor, 37, clerk). Likewise, Oana (43, financial consultant) reiterates the importance of affiliating with online communities of interest - *"whether truly accepted or not, we are parts of a higher order which make us feel it at all levels. EU is part of our daily routine and everyday lives, although not everyone acknowledges its present with the same intensity."*



For me, it is all about work and staying in the game, for my husband, it is about financial flows and economic facilitations, for my daughter, it is mainly a question of travelling with the ID only...”.

Conclusions

For the majority of respondents, EU involves the idea of unity, commonness or similarity. Although the angles are different, the interviewed individuals acknowledge that EU stands for a catalyst framework for achieving varied supranational goals, starting from social and economic facilitation to the human rights exploitation. Likewise, most of the subjects assume their status as European citizens in spite of the different viewpoints underscored. The European citizenship does not exclude the national one – the subjects have embraced both of them as a dual identity.

Stressing on their attitudes towards being informed about the EU dynamics, all the respondents acknowledge that being informed is the key to easier solutions in all the fields, not only when it comes to the European Union. As most of the answers point out, the subjects are familiar with the European institutions and general policies, but they usually lay emphasis on specific issues in accordance with their interests, jobs, fields of activity. In few words, the communities of interest are of the essence, catalyzing the orientation of widely-spread users towards similar goals.

Correlatively, as far as the EU communication is concerned, most respondents prefer the informal channels because they are more interactive, people with similar interests give voice to similar problems and solutions, independent of their countries. They have systematically confirmed that they are open to various communication channels among which official websites, new media and television are most mentioned. Still, almost all the subjects admit the attractiveness of new media whenever they try to found out more about specific EU-related issues. The general trend is that new media are attractive because, beside remote opinions or fragmentary information, one may find useful data or qualitative details on focused topics, you may access relevant data in an active manner.

Due to the fact that the respondents were chosen based on the criterion of active participation in EU-related new media, they search for novel information at least twice a month. As the evidence showed, new media and online participation are a strong facilitator for building a common sense or spirit for the interviewed subjects who primarily engage in debating Europe with a view to find an answer, an approach on specific issues.

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