Educación, comunicación y poder en el siglo XXI: retos y desafíos

Coords.
Antonia Isabel Nogales Bocio
Enrique Cebrián Zazurca
Javier De Sola Pueyo
Carlos Founaud Cabeza

EGREGIUS
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HORIZONTE ACADÉMICO

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ANTONIA ISABEL NOGALES BOCIO
ENRIQUE CEBRIÁN ZAZURCA
JAVIER DE SOLA PUEYO
CARLOS FOUNAUD CABEZA

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ÍNDICE

THE AFFECTIVE EUROPE IN CRISES SCENARIO: A PILOT STUDY ON STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND VALUES

LUCIA D'AMBROSI
Sapienza University of Rome

MARIAEUGENIA PARITO
University of Messina

RICARDO DIEGO PÉREZ CALLE
University of Zaragoza

ILONA BIERNACKA-LIGIĘZA
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University

NORBERT MERKOVITY
University of Szeged

LÁSZLÓ PETROVSZKI[25]
University of Szeged

1. INTRODUCTION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic have emerged as critical exogenous and unexpected events that have resulted in severe socio-economic and political consequences that imply rethinking transnational solidarity and the attitudes of European citizens towards risk-sharing. After a decade of polycrisis (Zeitlin et al. 2019), a new challenge opened for the European Union (EU), testing its crisis management capabilities, and raising question what European integration mean for the member states and Europe's position in the global political and economic scenario (Ferrara et al. 2023; Quaglia & Verdun 2023). Prior crises, such as economic recession and migration flows -

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[25] The article is the result of the collaboration of all authors. In the final draft, Introduction, par.1 and 4 are to be attributed to L. D'Ambrosi and to M. Parito, par. 2 to R. Pèrez Calle, the par. 3 to all the authors.

have already exposed the friction between national resistance and the need for stronger integration to address the threats; furthermore, they have shown a complex relationship between citizens and the EU. These crises have spurred highly politicised debates, particularly in the Central and Southern member states, with prominent role played by Eurosceptic political actors (Hutter et al. 2016; Risse 2015; Statham & Trenz 2013) with nationalistic and populist responses (Martinelli, 2011; Pasquinucci & Verzichelli 2016). As a result, trust in EU institutions and integration has decreased as study shows (Eurobarometer, 2020). However, the health emergency of Covid-19 forced to remind the need for cross-border cooperation and solidarity, leading to an increase in trust in EU (Eurobarometer 2021), in particular during the third stage of the pandemic, which involved discussion surrounding the recovery package to fund the post Covid-19 European society. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine brought to the forefront questions that often arise during times of crises regarding European collective identity, belonging, and solidarity (Papageorgiou & Immonen 2023). The foundation of the European identity lies in the peacekeeping efforts after the second world war and in the interdependence through inclusion of the strangers from different states for the sake of common interests (Beck & Grande 2004; Habermas 2004). But for the younger generation this element may not be as clear, and their understanding of the EU is likely to be rooted in their daily life and experiences, also in a mediatized environment in which the legacy media - often affected by a nation-based logic - coexist with platform logic and both are prone to information disorder (Bennett & Livingston 2018). Adopting a social constructivist perspective, we conceive EU collective identity, belonging, and solidarity as being articulated through ongoing processes of communication, in which different information flows converge. European and national institutions, media and various components of civil society are involved in this process, interacting in the public sphere to discuss social problems and political decisions (Habermas 1996). Within this multidimensional environment, public sector communication - promoted by the EU institutions and the governments of the Member States (Valentini & Nesti 2010) to connect with different publics in vertical and horizontal

processes - plays crucial role in fostering a "discursive community" of people who consider themselves as Europeans (Risse 2011). Indeed, the EU is not merely an economic and institutional space but also social spaces that requires public and practical representations to support the construction of meaning about the interconnected experience of its people. According to previous studies (Eurobarometer 2022; Parito et al. 2022), we contend that the young generation is an important target to study the European identity in the making, attitudes towards integration process, trust in European and national institutions, and solidarity between citizens in the crisis scenarios. Many scholars highlight a generational cleavage (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), with the younger individuals tending to be more pro-European Union than their older counterparts (D'Ambrosi et al. 2021; Lauterbacha & De Vriesb 2020; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2010). Furthermore, young people construct and reconstruct their identities in response to the social and political contexts that intersect with their daily lives (Ross 2019). Mainly, the various crises that have affected the EU over the last twenty years have encouraged young people to adopt a European way of thinking that emphasises universal values and social problems, such as human rights, peace, and the environment, and is characterised by practises and expressions of a self-actualizing citizenship (Bennett 2008).

The primary objective of this paper is to examine the effects of the unforeseen outbreak of the Russia - Ukraine war on the European identity of young citizens in Central and Southern Europe, within the socio-economic context of a post-pandemic society already strained by the health emergency. In particular, the study aims to investigate whether the dual crisis has influenced the confidence in the EU and its institutions among university students. The authors argue that highly educated young citizens, both from Central Europe and Southern Europe, can develop a conceptual framework for viewing social reality through European-based perspective. This perspective is expected to influence their levels of trust and sense of belonging within the European Union.

The proliferation of disinformation, as evidence by the Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, has had a significant impact on the functioning of the public spheres. This phenomenon has affected public debates regarding the EU and influenced the perception of EU institutions by citizens (OECD 2021; 2022). While not a new issue, scholars and commenters have previously attributed Brexit to post-truth politics (Farkas & Schou 2020), citing the extensive spread of misinformation and disinformation within the 'Leave' campaign (Marshall & Drieschova 2018; Orlando 2022). Moreover, since 2015, the EU institutions pay attention to disinformation, assuming it is a central issue to improve democratic participation in the digital environment. In this step, the concern was the foreign-origin hybrid threats emanating from Russia, as «massive disinformation campaigns, using social media to control the political narrative or to radicalise, recruit and direct proxy actor» (Join/2016/18: 2). The dangers of such campaigns became increasingly evident with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which was presented as a 'special military operation' aimed at 'de-Nazifying' the country.

In 2018, the EU Commission introduced a coordinated set of measures (Join/2018/36) designed to combat online disinformation, political propaganda, and narratives on social media. These measures were intended to address the contamination of information that infects public discourse on a wider range of topics, including medical disinformation and vaccines (Wardle & Derakhshan 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic, which emerged in the early 2020, became also an 'infodemic', further emphasising the risks associated with disinformation to the EU integration (Join/2020/8). EU institutions see Covid-19 as a crucial case that has underscored the need to address these issues while also working to improve strategies that empower citizens and civil society to counter dis/misinformation and reinforce the institutional role of journalism (D'Ambrosi et al. 2021; Lovari & Belluati 2023; Michailidou et al. 2023).

The EU Regulation on a Single Market for Digital Services (2022/2065), which was recently enacted, seeks to fully harmonise the rules governing intermediary services, thereby creating a safer digital space and protecting fundamental rights on digital media. This is particularly important given that online platforms have become highly sensitive environments for propaganda narratives and disinformation campaigns, which have had a strong impact on the representation of the EU since 2018.

The mediatization of the EU has been impacted by predominantly national media logics and information practices conditioned by negotiation with national political and institutional sources (Bellutati & Marini 2019). Media organisations are often inflexible in their approach to reporting on the EU and tend to prioritise national interests, while political actors seek to obtain consensus at the national level. As a result, EU-related news are frequently reported and framed with national biases or simplified to fit business logic using news values. Although the EU institutions have recognized this issue and promoted various strategies and funding activities to address it, success in this area has been limited.

The mediatized environment has created a situation where Eurosceptic and populist actors are likely to receive a heavy level of attention (Merkovity 2017). This is because they often fuel controversy and use simple, dichotomous frames to explain multifaceted events. News media routines further contribute to this situation by encouraging a representation of Europe that is characterized by opposing rhetoric: pro-Europe or anti-Europe (Marletti & Mouchon 2005). Moreover, a recent study suggests that the rise of media coverage of EU affairs could strengthen national identities, as the media tends to represent the EU as a zero-sum game between nations rather than a common project (de Wilde 2019).

Digital media does not appear to alter the trend. The online media constitutes a central arena for the challenge of political legitimacy in the context of European integration due to its potential to powerfully converge the online and offline spaces of newsmaking and debate, thereby generating specific attention and visibility. However, digital media do not establish separate and autonomous online public spheres

(Michailidou & Trenz 2015). Some studies suggest that the internet, and in particular social media platforms, reinforce or reflect ethno-cultural identities and can encourage nationalism (Barisione & Michailidou 2017; Caiani & Parenti 2013). The characteristics of social media platforms and online and digital media consumption habits may have an impact because they foster social bubbles of discussions, partisan polarisation in public debate and the dichotomous style of populist rhetoric (Sunstein 2017; Van Dijck et al. 2018).

It is worth emphasising that contentious politicized debates imbued with controversial discourses indicate the emergence of a dynamic European public sphere (Belluati & Marini 2019). However, polarized disputes combined with false or misleading contents contribute to the creation of a polluted discursive arena. The various crises, including the Eurozone crisis, migration crisis, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, are characterized by "differentiated politicisation" (de Wilde and Lord 2016; Hutter et. al. 2016), wherein polarized political views and debates are framed by strategic concerns, often involving the use of false information (Norris & Inglehart 2019). Thus, issues such as discussion bubbles on social media, partisan polarization in public debate, and the dichotomous style of populist rhetoric, and their effects on trust and a sense of belonging, should be viewed as related to the multiform dimensions of disinformation (Bennet & Linvigston 2018; Wardle 2019).

1.2. The European Commission's vision For supporting young students

Young students offer an intriguing perspective to explore the question of the European identity building, which is a critical issue in the context of European Union integration. In the 21st century, younger citizens who were born in one of the European Union member states have always lived in a society that is Europeanized, with no borders for studying, working, and traveling. They participate in both national and European elections, and most of them use a common currency. Hence, they can be regarded as 'de facto' European citizens. Nonetheless, their experience is shaped by everyday interactions and mediatised

environment, which could be influenced by a nation-based perspective (Beck & Grande 2004). The multiple crises that have affected the EU in the 21st century, such as the economic-financial recession, management of migration flows, and institutional reforms, have been associated with cultural backlash against progressive cultural changes (Norris & Inglehart 2019), leading to a rise in nationalism. The traumatic event of Brexit has further fuelled the debate on European disintegration rather than integration. As the recent Covid-19 pandemic has shown, in this era of globalization, there are problems, risks, uncertainties, and emergencies that require a post-national Europe for effective management. Nonetheless, Europeanisation remains an ongoing social and cultural process (Beck & Grande 2004; Castells 2000; Giddens 2007).

The education of young citizens is a critical factor in development of a European-based way of thinking, that influences trust, a sense of belonging in the EU, and finally European identity. European policies, particularly those focused on cultural and social dimensions, prioritise young people as a target for fostering knowledge, values, trust, and a sense of belonging to the EU. The European Commission's vision for the European Education Area aims to support new generation of Europeans who can cooperate across languages, and where "learning, studying and doing research would not be hampered by borders", developing a strong European identity (COM/2020/625). Policies related to media, communication, disinformation, and the digital environment also emphasise the need to empower citizens, especially young people, to promote social cohesion and democratic process. In response to Covid-19 emergency, the Digital Education Act Plan 2021-27:12 highlights the following: "Education and training institutions can help build resilience to information overload and disinformation, which becomes more widespread in times of crisis and major societal upheaval. Countering disinformation and harmful speech through education and training is crucial for effective participation in society and democratic processes, especially by young people". Moreover, the NextGenerationEU program endorses education as a foundational element of the national recovery and resilience plans, promoting and incentivising the acquisition of knowledge in the fields of science and technology among young individuals.

2. AIMS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The paper aims to conduct an analysis of the impact of the dual crisis, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia-Ukraine war, on European identity of young citizens in Central and Southern Europe. The primary objective is to investigate if the recent crises have resulted in a pro-EU mindset among university students from four member states - Italy, Spain, Hungary, Poland - while taking into account the impact of higher education.

The present study sought to address the following questions:

RQ1_ How have the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine affected young people's trust in institutions?

RQ2_ Has the Russia-Ukraine war resulted in an increase in a pro-EU attitude among the students?

RQ3_What perceptions of the European Union have emerged from these crises?

It is hypothesised that the double crisis has as a catalyst for altering perceptions of European identity among young citizens. It is further argued that educated youth from both from Central and Southern Europe attribute significant importance to the EU's role in addressing the consequences of these crises, which may have implications for their attitudes towards the EU.

Our study examines four countries: Italy and Spain from Southern Europe, and Hungary and Poland from Central Europe. These countries exhibit distinct cultural and political differences and varying perspectives on European integration. Italy is among the founding member states of the European Union and, along with Spain[26], one of its oldest member states. Both countries share similarities in terms of geographical, cultural, and political factors, as well as socio-economic history, and are considered Mediterranean nations. Additionally, Italy and Spain have been significantly impacted by previous crises, such as financial and

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[26] Spain joined the European Union on 1 January 1986.

migration crises, which have resulted in considerable economic and social consequences (Eurostat 2021; 2022) that have fuelled populist and nationalistic attitudes. Of note, younger generations in Italy and Spain have experienced grater effects of the crises than the older generations, which has led to feelings of anxiety for the future. Despite this, they consider voting to be the most effective political action for making their voice heard by decision-makers, particularly in relation to addressing unemployment concerns (Eurobarometer 2022).

Hungary and Poland, two Central European nations, have been members of the Europe Union since 2004. In 2022, they are governed by populist regimes[27], in power for more a decade, that are characterised by a political-cultural position that draws inspiration from the model of illiberal democracies (Zakaria 1997). These countries have faced challenges in the form of financial and migration crises, which had significant implications for their appeal to the EU in terms of safeguarding stability and prosperity (Grabbe & Lehne 2017). Furthermore, young people's attitudes towards politics in Hungary and Poland exhibit some similarities. According to the FES Youth Study Hungary 2021 research project (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó 2022), the youth population in these countries has displayed minimal interest in politics, a phenomenon that is not unique to these countries. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has altered this general apathy (Székely et al. 2021), as research has indicated that one-fifth of Hungarians displays interest in politics. Nevertheless, this proportion is notably lower than that observed in other Visegrad countries, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Poland (Bíró-Nagy & Szabó 2022: 51).

The research consists of two distinct stages. Firstly, a background analysis was conducted using statistical sources (Eurobarometer, OECD, Eurostat). They were used to investigate the attitudes and behaviours of young individuals with respect to political engagement and their relationship with the European Union. Secondly, an exploratory descriptive statistical analysis was conducted. The necessary data were collected

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[27] In Poland, the elections on October 15 2023 determined the victory of a pro-European and liberal coalition.

through a web survey administrated to students in higher education institutes from selected countries. The questionnaire was designed based on Eurobarometer surveys and previous research on European identity (D'Ambrosi et al. 2021; Parito et al. 2022) and was focused on two main areas of inquiry. The first area explores the impact of the Covid-19 and the Russia–Ukraine war on perception of the EU and the associated risks of disinformation. The second area aims to elicit the perspectives of young students regarding the meanings and values associated with the European Union.

The survey was conducted among students from several universities in the aforementioned countries and it achieved a total of 1265 respondents[28], aged between 18 and 30 years old. The majority of respondents were enrolled in social science and humanistic studies in bachelor of master level. The survey was administered in person during class or online lectures, and the response rate was 40%. Given the exploratory nature of the study, obtained sample was neither probabilistic nor representative of the population under investigation. The survey was administered in the local languages of the four countries during the initial months of the war (March-May 2022). Specifically, the dual crisis scenario resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and the war was considered as a temporal indicator to explore young individuals and their responses with respect to European identity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the findings is based on the theoretical framework and organised according the main thematic areas addressed in the survey. The data will be presented in summary form, with a focus on the Central and South European context. The results of the survey are organized along two dimensions. The first dimension pertains to cognitive support for the EU or specific policies, while the second dimension relates to affective and value orientations associated with identity formation.

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[28] The number of respondents is distributed as follows by nation: Italy 411, Spain 146 (Southern Europe); Hungary 440, Poland 268 (Central Europe).

The dimension of the survey that focused on young students' support for the European Union encompasses attitudes or opinions towards aspects regarding the EU, such as specific policies, goals, or tasks (Ciaglia et al. 2018). This set of indicators cover statements about the attitude of young individuals towards the EU over the last few years, the potential impact of disinformation, and the actions that the EU should take to address these issues. As a part of this research, students were asked to express their opinions about the European Union (as depicted in Fig. 1). The results indicate that students from the South and Centre of the EU generally agree that Europe offers a promising future perspective for young people. While half of the university students surveyed expressed support for the EU, a notable proportion did not agree with the way the European Union is currently functioning. Specifically, Polish and Hungarian students appeared to be more sceptical of the measures taken by the EU, but they may change their attitude if different actions and initiatives are adopted in the future, particularly in the areas of climate change and employment policies.

FIGURA 1. *Attitudes regarding the European Union*
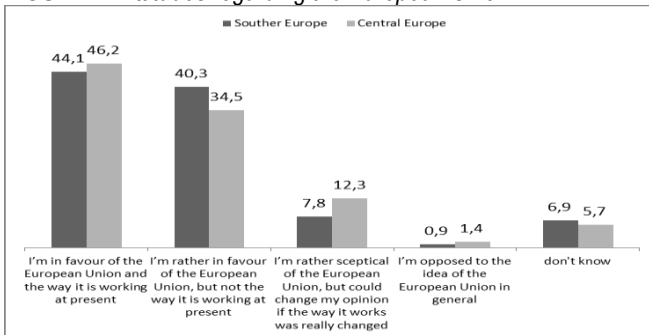
Source: own elaboration based on 1265 respondents

The double crisis has had varying effects on the perception of the EU among young students, as depicted in Figure 2. Notably, over half of the respondents reported no significant changes in their attitudes toward Europe, whether positive or negative. However, it is worth noting that the aforementioned crises have had detrimental impact on the perception of European actions for approximately one fifth of young

people. The implications of the European austerity measures and the effects of the war on the energy market may have activated nationalistic responses, leading to the rise of populist and anti-EU movements throughout the Union (Lehne 2022). In particular, the implementation of the Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism against the Hungarian and the Polish governments resulted in the dismissal of actions brought by the concerned countries, may have influenced the perception of potential benefits of European integration.

Despite the challenges faced by European Union due to dual crisis, young people from Central and South Europe remain optimistic about the future of the EU. This sentiment confirms the belief that the EU is the appropriate "place for working solutions" and for providing "concrete help" to address pressing issues (European Parliament 2020: 9). In particular, Polish students perceive war as "an existential crisis", mainly due to its impact on geographical borders, and acknowledge it is a European problem. Consequently, they recognise the EU as the most suitable organisation to defend Ukraine and protect its citizens (Krastev & Leonard 2022).

FIGURA 2. *The perception of EU during the double crisis*
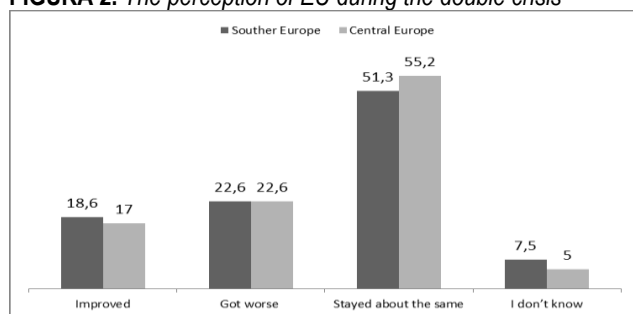
Source: own elaboration based on 1265 respondents

In the current context, the prevalence of disinformation since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the politics-centred narratives surrounding the war have had a detrimental effect on the perception of the EU (Sessa et al. 2023).

At the same time, young people in higher level of education express their trust in the EU institutions' efforts to combat disinformation and regard

these institutions as one of the most credible sources of information. This trend is consistent with the findings of Eurobarometer (Flash 506 2022), which indicate that two-thirds of respondents place a great deal of trust or tend to trust information provided by European and national institutions.

With regard to the role of the media, only slightly more than a half of young people express trust in journalists and press. Italian and Spanish students, in particular, tend to have a low level of trust in the media, schools, and fact-checking sources, especially during the pandemic.

In contrast, respondents are even more sceptical about social media platforms, with only 28% expressing confidence in them. This lack of trust can be attributed to the presence of confirmation bias mechanisms and the use of trolls to propagate disinformation, especially regarding Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine (OECD 2022). These factors contribute to the segregation of news and the spread of disinformation, further undermining trust in social media platforms.

Knowledge institutions such as universities or libraries are recognized as key actors in increasing awareness of the impact of scientific and technological developments on society. They are considered particularly important by Hungarian and Polish students, who regard these institutions as better qualified than political or bureaucratic institutions.

The education of young people is critical dimension for European policies seeking to encourage accurate and reliable information for the general public. According to survey responses, students believe that European institutions should invest in promoting quality information and open debate by prioritising media literacy and critical thinking education. More than 70% of respondents from Central and South Europe consider it important to implement the citizens' educational skills and promote digital literacy. Students express a positive evaluation of the other actors operating in the information sector, such as journalists and media, while demanding more accountability from platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter in disseminating and posting information. Additionally, implementing media freedom and pluralism and supporting the safety and empowerment of journalists are also perceived as critical questions that require attention, particularly in Italy and Spain.

In conclusion, the results of the survey indicate that young respondents are aware of the importance of European institutions and the need for coordinated action to promote transparent information and informed decision-making.

3.2 THE "AFFECTIVE" EUROPE: MEANINGS AND VALUES

Another dimension of indicators pertains to the meaning and values ascribed to the EU, which play a crucial role in the process of identity formation (Delanty & Rumford 2005; Hepp et al. 2016). This dimension encompasses the sharing of meanings and the construction of a symbolic common space, which is central to the European identity. The European identity, in turn, is conceived "as a narrative network embedded in an emerging network of social relations among the people living in Europe" (Eder 2009: 427). Hence, the stories that emerge in the process of constructing social relations among the people living in Europe hold more significance than mere political or cultural symbols (Eder 2009).

For the younger population, transnational mobility and study exchange programs, such as Erasmus+, facilitate opportunities for cultural and social connections across borders, thereby enhancing their sense of community identity (Mitchell 2012; Jacobone & Moro 2015). The emergence of a new media environment could also signify a crucial generational shift (Hepp 2020: 183). Specifically, with the deepening process of mediatization, the communicative practices of community formation undergo significant transformations, and diverse communities become more accessible. However, it is noteworthy that young people who engage with digital media do not necessarily become open, cosmopolitan, or pluralistic (Hepp 2020: 186).

Following the period of restricted mobility caused by health emergency, students from four countries contemplate the meaning of the EU, primarily based on the 'freedom to travel, study and work'. In particular, the respondents of the Central Europe tend to assess this statement positively (55%). On the other hand, those from Southern Europe (47.3) attach significance to the notions of Europe as a space of 'democracy and peace' and 'international security'.

European responses to the pandemic and the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine exhibit more differences than similarities, especially concerning the challenge of fostering solidarity among Europeans, which is at times difficult to achieve (Anghel & Jonens 2022). While the pandemic serves as a reminder of the imperative to express solidarity and cooperate across borders to address common challenges, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has ambiguous effects on integration (Genschel 2022) and could have varying impacts on citizens of member States with different cultures. Our survey data highlights that the Russia-Ukraine conflict has altered perceptions regarding the EU, reinforcing a positive attitude towards EU integration. More than half of the respondents claim that European integration should be strengthened, with students from countries led by nationalist governments exhibiting the highest percentage (59%). However, Italian and Spanish students express more cautious views, with more of them than their counterparts from Central Europe claiming that 'the European Union building is just an ideal project that is difficult to achieve' (45%). Similarly, Eurobarometer (2022) reveals a comparable trend among the general population, with 60% of Polish citizens feeling 'more European since the war in Ukraine', compared to 45% of Italian and Spanish citizens, and 36% of Hungarian.

Looking beyond the crises, a notable proportion of respondents (over 80%) assert that 'the EU should ensure a more unified response to global threats and challenges'. However, a considerable minority (over a fifth), especially students from Southern Europe, advocate for the EU to return more powers to the member states. The respondents attribute varying degrees of importance to the actions necessary for change. Specifically, Italian, and Spanish students (82%) emphasise that 'the states should be more prepared to share the financial burden' more so than their counterparts from Central Europe (69%). This finding highlights the enduring relevance of European austerity measures, despite the adoption of policies aimed at mitigating the socio-economic consequences of the health emergency.

The prolonged and contentious management of the refugee crisis appears to have influenced respondents' views on border control. More than half of the respondents (53%) support the containment of external

borders, although Hungarian and Polish students show a greater degree of support (63%) compared to their counterparts. On the other hand, the demand for a greater control of the borders between EU member states is more pronounced among Italian and Spanish respondents (42%) than among those from Central Europe (28%). Consequently, most students support the idea of "fortress Europe", which prioritises the European space over national interests.

The students' perception of the EU appears to be firmly grounded in their daily experiences and mediatised representations, including their values and beliefs. The crises serve as opportunities for recognising shared challenges and finding effective solutions.

4. CONCLUSION

The present exploratory study offers an intriguing perspective on the conceptualisation of European identity among university students. The participants view the European space as suitable platform for resolving complex issues and managing crises, moving beyond the mere symbolic interpretation of political or cultural markers. Instead, they favour an idea of a united Europe that emerges from their daily experiences.

Moreover, the respondents exhibit a degree of critical reflection towards the European project and some recent policies enacted by European institutions. While students from Central Europe advocate for strengthening European integration, Italian and Spanish respondents view the European Union as an idealistic project that is difficult to achieve. The persistence of geopolitical turbulence, as well as the risks associated with disinformation, highlights the need for more coordinated responses in the field of international security, including the need to counteract systematic information manipulation, such as cyber attacks, and promote a pluralistic media environment (OECD 2022). Notably, the consolidation of "fortress Europe" emerges as a key priority among the students. For Hungarians and Poles, it represents the only feasible way to manage external boundaries and the refugee crisis, while for young people from Italy and Spain, it could ensure greater control of the borders within member states. Additionally, around half of the respondents view

the EU as a means of accessing opportunities for travel, study, and work. This view implies that the EU serves as a container whose external boundaries must be safeguarded to guarantee the opportunities and the rights of "native citizens". Consequently, a form of pan-European nationalism emerges that transcends national borders and emphasises the importance of distinguishing between EU and non-EU entities in countering security threats.

The current situation characterised by dual crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war has had significant impact on recognizing the EU as a community capable of addressing shared problems effectively. In this context, the notion of European identity emerges as a space through which young students are developing a sense of belonging to a common way of living. Experiences and narratives converge toward a shared perspective of Europe, transcending the geographical and cultural differences of young respondents (Ciaglia et al. 2018; Parito et al. 2022). Interestingly, the students from the four countries demonstrate a more optimistic outlook regarding the future of the EU when compared to their respective country's general public opinion.

Further research and analysis are needed to gain a better understanding of the meaning that students attribute to the EU as an effective actor of democracy and peace. It is noteworthy that less than a quarter of the surveyed students mention democracy and peace, which is consistent with the results of Eurobarometer (2022) survey conducted in the same period among young people aged 15-30. This finding raises questions about whether young people, even in the context of unexpected conflict, consider democracy and peace as established values or values that are not specifically linked to European identity. It appears that they are more interested in supporting policies and actions that are inspired by postmodern values (Norris & Inglehart 2019) and that engage them in democratic renewal (Trenz et. al. 2020). Further research could explore these issues in a greater depth.

It must be noted that the collection of data reflects on the first months of the war, therefore, the responses in the study focus mainly on the perception of the EU in relation to Covid-19 pandemic crisis. The

authors did not collect data that could explain the specific reasons behind the students' responses. Thus, the research did not explore individual factors, such as previous knowledge on the European Union, socio-economic background, political affiliation, etc. on attitudes towards the EU. Also, a larger sample of young people with other levels of education could provide additional understanding. If some results of our analysis suggest that education is a relevant factor that explains a positive attitude towards European integration, other researchers need to understand whether a generational cleavage or an educational cleavage impacts more. Accordingly, future research should consider these aspects on a higher number of respondents and possibly in more countries to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the relationship between young people and the European Union.

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