Abstract

The present paper focuses on Romanian students who have recently completed or are about to complete their university studies in the UK, and aims to capture the influence that the foreign experience exerts on students’ identities. There were three main objectives guiding our approach: to reveal if participants in this study felt Romanians, Europeans, foreigners or otherwise during their study abroad; to show how national identity works in relation to European identity, if the latter was experienced; to explore the influence that studying and living abroad had on students’ identification as Europeans.

Though, as current research shows, foreign study practices are deeply related to young people’s feelings of Europeanness (Green, 2007; Fligstein, 2008, 2009; Favell, 2009), these theoretical ideas are seldom sustained by empirical evidence. Furthermore, experiences of students from newly integrated states, such as Romania, are rarely discussed and analyzed in a qualitative manner. Therefore, by means of 15 in-depth interviews, our paper highlights Romanian students’ personal perceptions of and experiences with Europe in an attempt to reveal the extent to which they foster the creation of a European identity among participants in this study.

Keywords: National identity, European identity, long-term academic mobility, Romanian students, intercultural contexts.

1. Introduction

Statistical data relevant for the theme of this paper offer valuable information about the constantly growing number of the young Romanian people who choose to study at a university abroad (Manea, 2013, pp. 13-20). With the fall of the Communism, the 1990s have brought major changes for Romanian people’s mobility. It was then when Romania started to gain free access to new cultures, beliefs and religions. Additionally, there were another two important moments that had major influences in the area of culture and education: the Bologna process and the country’s acceptance in the European Union. In this new context, mobility was under-
stood, in Urry’s terms, as a force that made people see beyond society, leading to a spectacular change of paradigm in the social sciences (Urry, 2000 in Byram & Dervin, 2008, p. 14).

Educational mobility, the focus of the present paper, became thus easy and handy in recent years for Romanian students too. As current research shows, “mobility programs offer opportunities for personal and professional development in an intercultural climate, in new learning contexts and, more than that, contribute to the development of the European dimension of education and training” (Păunescu & Precupetu, 2007, p. 4). In this context, students’ reasons to complete their university degree abroad are various and multiple, but they largely have to do with their dissatisfaction regarding the Romanian academic system as opposed to the educational perspectives offered by the foreign universities (Manea, 2013, p. 15). This is what a study conducted in 2012 by The League of Romanian Students Abroad (and based on a sample of 1061 people) reveals – that Romanian young people are most often convinced to take the opportunity of studying abroad after learning about the educational offer in Romania which 62% of the students consider to be not at all motivating. At the same time, “the employment offer” (after graduating) in Romania is not tempting for other 57% of the 1061 surveyed students (Manea, 2013, p. 15) a fact that, we may argue, represents another strong reason for them to fulfill higher education outside Romania.

Drawing on the aforementioned ideas, the present research aims to shed a light on some less known aspects in the literature dedicated to studying academic mobility in relation to European identity (Dervin, 2011; Kuhn, 2012; Mitchell, 2012). In short, we centre our paper on the experiences of young Romanian students who enroll in a foreign educational system (the British one, in our particular case) for the whole period of their university studies – that is for 3 years the minimum. And we try to find out what are the main changes that the intercultural experience brings to their identity feelings. More exactly, we asked ourselves and our respondents if studying and living in another European country brought any significant transformations in the way they perceive themselves and others. Did they actualize a European dimension of their own identity? Was their nationality a powerful identifier while abroad? How does national identity work in relation to the European identity (if and when the latter was actualized) and what does it mean to be European for participants in this research? Regarding the last question we were interested to capture the relationship between students’ European sense of belonging and their national, local or regional identifications (which, we assume, are quite strong at the beginning of the academic sojourn and become weaker as students adapt to the new cultural environment). Put differently, we tried to understand if national and European identities are co-existing phenomena that may be brought into full light one at a time (Wintle, 2005; Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009); or, on the contrary, they are conflicting and opposing to some degree.

Furthermore, since one of the major goals of the present paper is exploring the influence that the (long-term) academic experience abroad exerted on Romanian students’ feelings of Europeanness, it is necessary to state the role of foreign study sojourns in instilling a European sense of belonging among participants, as it is depicted by literature in the field. In this sense, we are required to mention that there is a common view in recent scholarship on European identity formation that cross-border mobility in general and student exchange programmes in particular may be seen as means of enhancing a European consciousness and European identity feelings among younger generations of Europeans (Wallace, 1990; Bruter, 2005; Green, 2007; Fligstein, 2008, 2009; Favell, 2009). In short, most of the authors above hold that by intermixing students of different cultures and nationalities, the foreign study ex-
perience plays a main role in generating a shared sense of community and a European identity from below. Though it is only seldom backed by empirical evidence (King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Van Mol, 2011), this view rests on a solid theoretical basis – see, for instance, “the social communication theory” (Deutsch, et. al, 1968) and “the social psychology’s contact hypothesis” (Allport, 1954; Hewstone & Brown, 1986) as well as “the common in-group identity model” (Gaertner et al., 1993) which, in Mitchell’s terms, “highlight the significance of transnational and intergroup contact as mechanisms for identity-formation and reducing intergroup bias” (2012, p. 491). However, as we pointed before, though most of the empirical works do not support the causal relationship between foreign study sojourns and the assuming of a European identity (Sigalas, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Wilson, 2011), they do in fact offer compelling evidence that educational mobility facilitates intercultural contact, attitudinal changes about Europe and the EU, and increases students’ interest in the EU affairs and in other European countries, people and cultures. Moreover, as some of the most recent studies show, Erasmus students in particular reported greater levels of attachment to Europe and the EU compared with students who did not spend a part of their university studies abroad (Mitchell, 2012).

Based on the previously exposed theoretical assumptions and empirical results we wanted to capture if and to what extent our respondents’ study abroad caused them self-categorize as Europeans. Yet, it is important to underline that our findings are the result of student’s own perspectives on this matter, thus they are highly subjective and dependent on students’ personal perceptions of, experiences with and feelings regarding Europe, the European Union and other Europeans.

The article develops in four sections. Initially, it engages with discussing the originality of the approach and the value that our research may add to the extant literature on the subject. The second part introduces the terms “identity”, “national identity” and “European identity”, aiming to explain how they are understood and conceptualized for the present paper. The next section highlights the way national and European identifications work in relation to each other, presenting the main scenarios forwarded by literature in this sense. Finally, the last section analyses the empirical findings, elaborating on conclusions and implications of this study.

2. Why choosing this theme? The originality of the approach and the added value of the present work

The importance of this theme represents an unquestioned reality in Romanian context. As suggested before, the phenomenon of mobility (in search of a job, an education or a life style) has considerably expanded since the country joined the European Union in 2007 and continues to be a debated and questioned issue, marking Romanians’ cultural identity in a continuous manner. For the last decade, the number of young people from Romania who decided to study abroad has considerably increased (Manea, 2013, p. 13). The technological boom and the large access to different resources determined young people to develop multiple interests and the desire for personal and professional growth. According to the Institute of Statistics of The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the percentage of Romanian youngsters who study abroad has constantly increased after the 1990s. If in 1998 the mobile students were about 10000, twelve years later, in 2010 their number was three times...
higher, being estimated at 29846 (Manea, 2013, p. 13). As for the countries of destinations, according to the previously quoted author, Romanian students have chosen to go mostly to the UK (4553), Spain (4190), Italy (4174), France (3856), and Germany (3746). Considering these data, our choice to focus on students who applied for a degree in British universities was predominantly justified by the fact that, nowadays, as research shows, the UK represents Romanian students’ favorite destination when it comes to fulfilling higher education abroad.

The subject we propose in this paper is quite new in the context of Romanian research, and the qualitative approach of this theme (based on in-depth interviewing) is also original. Put differently, empirical research conducted in Romania is still lacking empirical information regarding how different layers of students’ identities are activated and experienced during the whole period of an undergraduate degree abroad. Also, the influence that long-term educational mobility might have on young peoples’ national feelings as well as on their sense of Europeanness is an under-researched area in the sparse literature on student migration as well. Though previous research (Pâunescu & Precupețu, 2007) has analyzed the Erasmus mobility in relation to students’ personal and professional development, underlying the impact of the foreign study experience on students’ qualifications and capacities, this is the first paper to discuss the academic mobility (other than Erasmus) in relation to identity shifts. However, it is important to mention that the theme of educational mobility in relation to European identity feelings has been previously approached (both theoretically and empirically) by Romanian scholarship, noting that the surveyed participants were Erasmus students (Brasoveanu, 2010; Udrea & Corbu, 2011; Udrea, 2012). In this context, we found it highly relevant to bring to the forefront and discuss “spontaneous” instead of “organized” mobility – that is experiences of students who make their own arrangements to travel to another country to study for the whole of an undergraduate degree (Brooks & Waters, 2011, p. 70).

3. National and European identities nowadays: a few remarks on their meanings and conceptualizations

Much has been written on national and European identity and still, the literature reveals opposing claims, confusion and disagreement about the core characteristics of these complex phenomena. During the last two decades, the concept of “identity” – individual and collective – has become of much interest for academics and ordinary citizens as well. Originating from mathematics and logic, where it had a precise meaning of “similarity-cum-difference”, this term has migrated to social sciences, employing, in Smith’s terms, “an unhealthy fog of confusion that precludes serious analysis” (2011, p. 226). The one and only common point in research regarding “identity” is that the concept is “vague”, “ambiguous”, and “enigmatic” (Aguilar & Francisco, 2009, p. 551), and “made to do a great deal of work” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 8).

Starting from the literature that discusses the multiple nature of people’s “identity” (Smith, 1992, 1993; Chechel & Katzenstein, 2009), this paper argues that individuals assume different layers of identification throughout their life, in terms of different contexts and situations (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Straubhaar, 2008). Also, as applied to this work, the concept of “identity” will designate a “construction”, a process that is constantly shaped, reshaped and negotiated with the people around us (Delanty, 2005, p. 129). In short, identity beliefs “form
complex but open structures” (Aguilar & Francisco, 2009, p. 566) and they are constantly subject to revision and reinterpretation. This means that identity is not unique, nor integral, but it represents a multilayered construction, “a fuzzy set of roles” (Montgomery, 2000) depending on people’s lifestyle and activities. In similar terms, people may develop several identities that diverge and converge according to the need of the moment. Furthermore, identities’ construction always involves processes of classification, of inclusion to and exclusion from human groups and subgroups (Mummendey & Waldzus, 2004). Thus, the process of identification implies an interaction, between how we identify ourselves and how others categorize us, between self-image and public image (Jenkins, 2008).

In what national identity is concerned, it is well known that the extant literature has provided little consensus on the theoretical underpinnings of the concept or its empirical exposition. The available definitions conceive national identity as “a collective cultural phenomenon”, “a multidimensional concept, extended to include a specific language, sentiments and symbolism” (Smith, 1991, p. vii), “an intensity of feelings towards one’s country” (Carey, 2002, p. 388). According to most authors, national identification transcends all the other loyalties, in scope and power, becoming the “cultural and political norm” (Smith, 1992, p. 58). Put differently, the ethnic and national levels of identification take priority and remain much more vivid and accessible to the mass of the population than more abstract identities like that of Europe (Smith, 1993; Risse, 2001).

National identity can never be induced in a population by artificial means. It is a complex construct, composed of interrelated components – ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic, legal-political, and emotional, coexisting in varying degrees and different forms, and signifying bonds of solidarity among members of communities. These interrelated elements provide people a sense of common identity and belonging. National identity “provides a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world” (Smith, 1991, p. 17). The author also stresses that through a shared, unique culture, people are enabled to know who they are in the world. By rediscovering that culture they rediscover themselves, and this process of self-definition is considered to be the key to national identity.

On the other hand, European identity has been in a construction and reconstruction process throughout history, but during the last twenty years, the debate around this concept has generated a growing interest and amount of research in various academic disciplines. As already suggested in the beginning of this section, in spite of the fact that many researchers today have something to say about European identity, there is no unified perspective regarding how such an identity is formed or which are those factors determining its development and evolution. Leaving aside the scholars who deny the existence of a European identity (Ferencová, 2006, p. 4), in line with some of the most recent works on the subject (Bruter, 2005; Haller & Ressler, 2006; Fligstein, 2008; Risse, 2010; Udrea, 2012), we suggest that nowadays more and more people (especially the young and educated ones, having financial possibilities to travel abroad for study, work or vacations) articulate European identity feelings among other important loyalties (local, national, social, religious, ethnic etc.).

However, academics who agree that European identity exists beyond theory (Bruter, 2005; Risse, 2010; Wintle, 2011) “remain divided over its significance in everyday life” (Van Mol, 2011, p. 31). Thus, for the purpose of this paper we will understand and define European identity in “civic”, “cultural” and “instrumental” terms (Ruiz Jimenez et al., 2004; Bruter, 2005). Building on the aforementioned authors’ conception, we will conceptualize European “civic” identity as referring to citizens’ sense of belonging to the EU as an institutional, eco-
nomic and political framework, their commitment to the duties and rights of a civic society covering specific areas of public life. “Cultural” identity, on the other hand, applies to Europe as a whole, as a continent of shared civilization. Furthermore, the European “instrumental” identity is based on a self-interested calculation involving the potential gains and losses that might result from membership to the EU. In this sense, some authors claim that “instrumental self-interest and territorial identities contribute considerably to explaining support for common foreign affairs and defense policies” (Schoen, 2008, p. 5).

In order to keep the concept “manageable”, in the context of our research European “civic” identity will be shaped by students’ references to their commitment to the shared values of the Union (democracy, peace, end of rivalries etc.) and to the institutional and legal order within which citizens can exercise their duties and rights (such as the free movement right for study, work or travel). At the same time, European “cultural” identity will be conceptualized in terms of attachment to Europe (Kuhn, 2012, p. 11) and through the perception of students that they feel closer and attached to fellow Europeans, with whom they feel they share some cultural traditions, religious values and other common things. Finally, students’ references to the EU and the “advantages” brought along by the EU membership (either economical or political) will be interpreted as evidence for the existence of an “instrumental” European identity.

In addition to the above, it is important to underline and explain our main assumption regarding the way Romanian students that follow higher education abroad understand and experience European identity. Thus, we suggest that our respondents are very likely to assume a rather civic and pragmatic or instrumental sense of Europeanness, based on the fact that they associate the European identity with several benefits that were available to them in the recent past, especially once Romania became a member state of the EU. This argument draws on studies which tackle the reasons for supporting the European Community especially in terms of material interests. In this sense, Hewstone (1986, p. 43) reveals that “a widespread recognition of rewards is a necessary precondition of stronger and more enduring ties of loyalty”. Also, Díez Medrano (1995) reveals that social actors try to evaluate the advantages they may obtain from different possible self-identifications in order to choose those that prove the most advantageous. In the light of these studies, we consider that in newly integrated states such as Romania, people might be tempted to evaluate the EU mostly in material terms. This doesn’t mean that Romanians’ more idealistic interests of an affective kind about the European Community do not exist at all. It is obvious that economic benefits alone are not enough to establish the legitimacy of the EU, and that mass opinion about such a complex structure “is highly likely to be based upon a mixture of different factors and dispositions” (Bosch & Newton, 1995, p. 75). More to the point, we only assume that, in the case of young Romanian citizens, specific or instrumental evaluations of the European Union tend to outweigh idealistic reasons for supporting it. The research carried out by Bruter in 2004, sustains this point of view. By using focus-groups for analyzing European identity and the sense of membership to the European Community, the author discovered that Romanians had a tendency towards associating it more with economic prosperity and democratic values, and less with a stronger political power in the world. At the same time, following Green (2007, p. 102), we argue that it is highly possible that students from our target group assume a European identity as an alternative to national identity, mostly since their home state institutions have been discredited and since economic and social conditions of life in Romania are perceived as precarious.
by most people. However, the previously exposed theoretical standpoints will be largely verified with empirical results.


The most common question in the literature regarding the relationship between national and European identities is whether they are coexisting or rather conflicting. This question appeared mainly in the context of the construction and further enlargement of the European Union, a process that raised “fundamental questions about the ability of people voluntarily to acquire new forms of identity with new political institutions” (Robyn, 2005, p. 1). As expected, researchers do not share a common view on this matter; consequently most of the studies that approach the relationship between national and European identities are in conflict. On the one hand there are academics who argue that the two concepts are contradictory and that a strong national sentiment can destroy any possibility of developing feelings of European identity (Carey, 2002, pp. 387-413; McLaren, 2006). In this sense, the two forms of collective identity are seen as conflicting and exclusive (Peters, 2005, p. 93), and national unity is perceived as being threatened by the European sense of belonging.

On the other hand, some other authors focus on the way different levels of identification interact, as in the nested identity theory (Herb & Kaplan, 1999; Diez Medrano & Gutierrez, 2001). According to the second perspective, the construction of a European identity does not necessarily imply replacing national identity, but rather a coexistence of a dual belonging to both a national and a transnational community. As recent research shows (Bruter, 2005; Risse, 2010; Udrea, 2012), there are increasing numbers of Europeans who claim to have some kind of European identity, often alongside a national identity. This is the case when “identities do not wax or wane at each other’s expense” (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009, pp. 9-10), consequently people may articulate various loyalties at the same time. Some of these loyalties are usually stronger and remain much more vivid and accessible to the mass of the population – this is the case of national identity (Smith, 1993; Risse, 2001); others, like the identity of Europe, are more abstract identities and may be assumed in certain circumstances and, as current research shows, mostly by a certain category of people – those from the privileged strata of society, speaking one or more foreign languages, having higher incomes or the opportunity to travel and interact with similar individuals across borders (Haller & Ressler, 2006; Favell, 2009; Fligstein, 2009). In conclusion, the European identity may be defined as a “multilevel identity” (Varsori & Petricioli, 2004, p. 90) which “does not exclude or deny other “identities”, other “loyalties”; therefore, one can be Romanian and European at the same time because, as previously suggested, identities are processes of constant change and negotiation with those around us, being mainly “constructed” through interaction and institutionalization (Jenkins, 2008).

Concerning the premise that our study builds upon, we insist that national and European identities are not opposing nor excluding each other; instead, we consider them to be complementary layers of identification that can be activated or highlighted in terms of context and situation. And this happens because, as discussed before, many people experience some kind of balance between their various collective identities (Bruter, 2005; Wintle, 2000, 2005), which allows them to feel attached to their native countries and to Europe, at the same time. For instance, in our particular case, we assume that Romanian students are likely to strong-
ly identify with their national identity, especially in the beginning of their foreign experience, when they are making serious efforts to adapt to a totally new socio-cultural and educational environment. In this sense, the Romanian colleagues they meet there or the ones they leave the country with might represent important means of adaptation and cause them to assume an even stronger national identity. Then, as they feel more integrated in the host culture, the probability that students start to actualize other loyalties along their national ones (such as the “international student” and the “European” identities) is even higher. And the European (secondary) identification may be due to multiple factors, among which the civic and instrumental ones are particularly important for our study. In different words, we argue that as students become more aware of their new self interests and possibilities (which often have little to do with their national belonging and are rather associated with membership to the EU) they start perceiving themselves as more European. Briefly, our hypothesis is in line with the perspective promoted by Ruiz Jimenez et. al (2004) who state that while national identities are largely “cultural”, European identities are primarily “instrumental”. Or, as Schild (2001) puts it, the European level of identity tends to be more evaluative, whereas the national is viewed as more affective. And the following empirical section of the paper will offer strong evidence to back these theoretical claims.

5. Methodology

This study started from the premise that people, throughout their lives, have to deal with multiple identities that articulate different but coexisting senses of self (among which local, national and even European or global ones). Our purpose was to investigate the various identity layers that 15 Romanian students have experienced during their degree sojourn in Europe. In this sense, we have tried to explore if and to what extent our respondents assumed a European sense of belonging and also to find out how this identity dimension functioned in relation with their national and other identifications. Additionally, we were interested to learn whether the foreign study experience played any role in enhancing European identity feelings among participants in this research.

In order to meet our aims we conducted in depth interviews with Romanian students aged between 19 and 23, with higher education completed or in progress who chose the United Kingdom for higher education purposes. It is important to mention that participants in this study are still in Britain though some of them have already graduated.

The research questions that guided the analysis refer to different layers of identity as highlighted by the intercultural experience: Do Romanian students feel Europeans or rather citizens of their own country during their academic sojourn aboard? What is the relationship between the national and the European senses of belonging (if the latter was actualized) and what does it mean to be a European for participants in this research? Do Romanian students believe their foreign study sojourn influenced in any way their perception as Europeans?

In order to answer these questions we have chosen the qualitative analysis, and particularly the semi-structured in-depth interviews. The main reason to use this method was our interest to gain knowledge of the personal experiences of the surveyed students. Furthermore, because most of our respondents are still in Britain at the moment we had to conduct our interviews online. Thus, we used the well known Skype application, in order to capture students’ verbal as well as non verbal expressions. Interviews were taken in January and March 2013, all of them
being recorded for further analysis. They lasted approximately 30 minutes each, and were designed to look quite informal and free, in spite of a very precise interview guide. The interview guide contained 18 items that followed and developed the main research questions.

Students were asked about their personal and direct experiences with the UK and Europe considering, in line with Bruter (2005), that their attitudes towards the Union and other Europeans are largely based on what they think and know of Europe and other fellow Europeans (whom they have met in great number during their academic mobility). Also, another purpose of the present research was to establish the extent to which these experiences influence their various levels of identity (particularly the national and the European ones).

A last important aspect that should be mentioned refers to the fact that participants in our study proved to be very open, warm, friendly and eager to share their experiences. They were very pleased with the interest we manifested for their experience of international students and ready to give us all the details we asked for.

6. Findings and discussion

In what follows, we will organize our analysis in three main parts corresponding to the main research questions and objectives of the study. Thus, the first part will introduce and discuss data about respondents’ identity feelings and the circumstances when they were actualized. The second part will investigate the relationship between national, European and other identifications in terms of conflict or peacefully coexistence. And the final part will emphasize whether and to what extent studying and living abroad had a certain influence in students’ perceptions as Europeans.

6.1. Identity feelings expressed by Romanian students during their academic sojourn abroad

Concerning the identity layers experienced by Romanian students in the host socio-cultural environment, empirical results revealed various situations that emphasized different identity dimensions. In this sense, 11 out of 15 respondents affirmed that, while abroad, they have usually identified first and foremost with their national identity. In their case, however, there could be identified two different trends: on the one hand some students affirmed their national identity as their unique identity (a fact that made us include them into the so called category of “exclusive nationalists” (Kuhn, 2012)); on the other hand most of the 11 students argued that, although Romanian identity was their main identity, it could also be followed by other identifications. The next quotes are relevant for both of the contexts discussed above: “I (only) feel Romanian now because this is my nationality and it cannot be changed” (Bianca, 19); “I am Romanian and nothing more than that. I don’t believe in the creation of some artificial identities especially in a short period of time” (Andrei D., 21) versus “I am Romanian because I was born in Romania and I will never forget that; and I am a European citizen because I am an educated, respectful and civilized person” (Mădălina N., 19).

Additionally, the great majority of the surveyed students felt proud of their Romanian nationality in general, but mostly whenever a co-national’s success was recognized at the international level: “I always feel Romanian and proud… a recent example that made me happy with my nationality was during the Olympic Games in London when I told the whole world...”
about the high quality of Romanian gymnastics” (George C., 23); “I am always proud of my Romanian origins. You know, things are not usually as they seem to be. I mean, people here, they really know things about us and our country. To meet people from some countries you don’t even know to identify on the map, people who greet you in your own language, and ask you lots of questions about Dracula, Transylvania, Nadia, Ceaușescu […] this is completely shocking!” (Mădălina N., 19).

An interesting finding is that some participants in this research happened to experience their national identity negatively, as well. There were certain contexts when the Romanian sense of self was perceived as an impediment in achieving specific goals: “Honestly, I feel Romanian because, though I don’t need a visa to cross the borders of England, the English government continues to ask Romanians and Bulgarians for that yellow card which is a special work permit for us” (Diana N., 20).

Furthermore, 10 out of 15 students declared that, at present, they perceive both identity layers: national and European, specifying that their nationality usually comes first, while other identifications as the “European” (and/or the “international”) are less powerful: “I am Romanian in the first place, but after that I feel European too. Romania is where I was born and raised…but membership to the EU is also a positive thing” (Sandra N., 20); “I feel Romanian because I was born this way. Still, I became European through education” (Teodora S., 19).

However, there were some students (4, more exactly) who said they felt primarily European while abroad, mostly because they were perceived as such in the host culture. In this sense, Andra I. (22 years old) argued that, after more than 3 years in the UK (she has just finished her BA studies) she doesn’t really feel Romanian anymore, while her European identity has become significantly accentuated: “I feel European because here I am not perceived as Romanian”. On the other hand, Alexandra F. (20 years old) revealed similar identity feelings and arguments: “I have to admit that I feel more European than Romanian. Obviously, this has to do a lot with the way I am perceived here”. Also, one of the 15 respondents tends to assume a European identity as some alternative to his national sense of belonging: “I feel European because I have access to their education system and funding from the English government. I feel Romanian because, so far, I have no right to work here” (George C., 23).

Besides the identification with their home country, with Europe and the EU, most of the sojourning students mentioned the group identity – their identity of international students attending higher education abroad. The fact that they shared the same status with other young people from all over the world – the status of foreigners who found themselves in a foreign environment for academic purposes – helped students create bonds and cope more easily with the challenges imposed by the new culture. Also, the “international student” identity was made prominent by specific events that the host university program offered to all international students, by them studying and living together in many cases, and by the simple fact that they felt similar and close to each other just by being internationals: “The idea that we are all away from home made us get closer and create beautiful friendships” (Maria, 20);

In the end of this section it is significant to stress that, as we assumed in the theoretical side of the paper, the surveyed students articulated various identity layers in terms of the different contexts and people they interacted with. Another quote that underlines this idea is exposed below: “For my British colleagues I am an international, like any other foreign student there. Among the other international students with whom I am related through the shared experience that we live I am seen as a European” (Andrei I., 21).
Also, a relevant observation in the context of our paper is that the European identity feelings some students previously described were understood in deep connection with their adaptation to the foreign environment. Interviews revealed that our respondents tended to assume other identity levels alongside their national belonging especially once they felt more secure and more integrated in the host country. Put differently, there was a significant difference between the first six months of being abroad and the rest of the sojourn. Specifically, the great majority of our respondents agreed that in the beginning of the academic sojourn (when they made considerable efforts to cope with the host environment) they experienced a strong connection with their national identity. The main reasons for developing an even stronger national identity were the lack of (foreign) friends which caused students to look for contact with other Romanians that were already there: “First time you get there you feel lost and you try to find similarities with the life you were used to. This is why when you meet Romanians in the same situation as you are it’s easy to empathize with them and to become friends. And everything happens because of the existence of a common thing: the national identity”. (Diana N., 20). Then, as time passed and the new culture became less foreign, most of the students started to experience other identity dimensions.

After presenting the various contexts that highlighted or shadowed different facets of students’ identities while abroad, the next few paragraphs will try to reveal what European means for participants in this study. However, it should be noted that what the interviewees regard to be the significance of “being European” was left to their own imagination and/or personal experience. In this concern, findings showed that respondents’ understandings of this concept are mainly civic and instrumental. Thus, to be European means, first and foremost, to have the same rights and duties as all the people who live in Europe (for 7 out of 15 students), to be able to study abroad, and to receive funding for your education from foreign governments, to have the chance to travel in Europe without passport, to have access to information etc. The following quotes will enforce the ideas above: “To be European means to have the exactly same rights and obligations as anyone else in this category, recognized and respected by everybody” (Bianca, 19); “For me, to be European means the opportunity to travel with my ID card and study anywhere I want to. I feel European through membership in the EU and the benefits it offers” (Andrei S., 20); “Being European involves the right to information and to plenty of other liberties and chances… it means the opportunity to travel” (Raluca M., 21).

Still, there were some students who mentioned cultural and civilizational meanings of Europe alongside other civic and pragmatic meanings: “To be European means, firstly, to belong to a cultural area based on Greco-Roman and Christian roots, on liberal democratic ideologies and devotion to the principles of Enlightenment and reason. It also means that I have rights and freedoms like any other European citizen” (Andrei I., 21); “Personally I believe that being European means being free and equal with the rest of European citizens; it means to have access to education and information, the possibility to travel more easily and also, the chance to be part of a group of countries that share the same historical background, the same cultural and geographic space” (George, 23); “I have never thought about what European means to me… if it means something… I don’t know, I think it’s the simple fact that we have some common origins… something like that” (Alexandra S., 19). In this context, it is important to accentuate the fact that participants in this study did not often express feelings of attachment to Europe or to fellow Europeans which is why we consider that they are hardly likely to develop a European cultural identity in the next future.
Furthermore, though most of our respondents described European identity in terms of several benefits and rights, in some cases students expressed distrust regarding the existence of this concept beyond theory: “I do not credit this idea of European citizenship and identity. The current discourse around this topic is kind of useless, in my view, because it has no solid basis. We are far from creating a European community, because this kind of community needs many, many years and it can only be generated by common principles and values and history… Until recently, in Europe everyone was fighting against everyone, so it’s hard to find that many common things” (Andrei D., 21).

6.2. National and European identity feelings: how were they experienced and interrelated during students’ studies abroad?

As the empirical findings presented in the previous section underlined, most of the students who strongly identified with the European (civic and/or pragmatic) sense of belonging were convinced that the two identity levels are not opposing: “I feel a European citizen with Romanian nationality… these are two different things that are not exclusive in my view… I think I’m not less Romanian if I take the advantages that the EU offers” (Andrei S., 20); “Identity is a fluid thing with multiple facets… So far and in the future also I am a Romanian national, a Romanian citizen. As Romania has been, historically, an area of transition between East and West, culturally and civilisationally speaking it belongs to Europe. Therefore, my identity is also European, so I consider myself” (Andrei I., 21).

The present research made it evident that national and European identity feelings are usually complementary and not exclusive for most of the surveyed students. In fact, 10 out of 15 respondents think that one can conceive both identities; one can experience the European sense of self without replacing his/her national identity: “I consider myself a European citizen with Romanian nationality. After almost two years in London, I cannot see myself again only with one of the two identities” (Alexandra S., 19).

Though national identity feelings are commonly stronger and became prominent quite often during various interactions and activities, participants in our research revealed that their European identity feelings were not entirely eclipsed by national identifications. On the contrary, there were different situations when students were happy and proud to see themselves as Europeans: “I am proud of this status of European citizen… I embraced this feeling from the very beginning of my academic sojourn in England. As an example, I felt very happy when I worked on a media project with colleagues of different nationalities. And even if we came from different cultural backgrounds, we got along pretty well, we have done a good project together and we’ve even took a prize for it” (Andra I., 22).

In one particular case though, the two main identities analyzed in this paper were considered as exclusive. Moreover, the European identity was understood and accepted as an alternative to a national belonging that is not appreciated or valued by the respondent: “I do not consider myself a Romanian citizen anymore because in the United Kingdom I am just an international student, or a European one. I have to admit I am glad they do not treat me as a Romanian” (Sandra N., 20).
6.3. The role that the sojourning experience played in students’ assuming a European identity level

This section presents some empirical findings concerning a controversial issue in current scholarship – that is the causal relationship between foreign study experiences and European identity feelings. In order to find out whether studying (and living) in another European country brought any significant transformations in the way our respondents perceive themselves (and others), we asked them directly (but also indirectly) about the effect they appreciate that the sojourning experience might have had on their self-identification as European. Thus, we admit once again, that the following results are highly subjective and contextually derived, therefore they cannot be generalized or applied to significant samples (for instance to all the Romanian students who fulfill their university degree in the UK) without further investigation.

However, to briefly answer the question above – which we have also set out at the beginning of this study – most of the students we have surveyed for this research considered their educational mobility to be significant in facilitating their assuming of a European sense of belonging (defined, as before, mostly in civic and/or instrumental terms). The fact of being abroad, studying and living together with international students from all over Europe, determined Romanian students feeling equal to all the other European citizens and, in some cases, also proud of their belonging to the EU: “By being a student here I already feel very European… you know, I have all the rights that any European citizen has… well, less the right to work in the UK… but I don’t think I would have felt the same if I had stayed at home” (Andrei I., 21); “Studying abroad did facilitate, in a way, the feeling that I belong to Europe more than geographically… I don’t know… For me, to be European means to be equal with the rest of the groups… I am not necessarily proud of this status, but still… I am happy to be part of this larger group of European citizens” (George C., 23); “The foreign study experience makes me see myself as a European citizen with Romanian origins […] I feel European through membership in the EU and the benefits it offers […] And I became more aware of these benefits when I decided to go abroad” (Andrei S., 20).

Two other students underlined the influence their educational mobility exerted on their European identity feelings by stressing aspects related to the difference between being a student in Romania versus being a student in the UK. For instance, Sandra N. (20 years old) reveals: “I feel European through my studies. Here I have access to a different and better education, students are respected and… people here understand what it means to be away from home and to work to pay your studies”, while Teodora S. (20 years old) confesses: “I feel European through my education because, as a student, I have a better reputation here than home. I mean, … the English people are aware of the high level of their university programmes – which very often make their lives difficult too – not to mention how hard it is to attend those courses as an international student”.

In addition, some respondents argued that without the opportunity to study abroad and the experiences derived from it, their sense of Europeanness would have remained a lot less prominent: “I didn’t use to think about Europe or the European affairs too often before … I’m not doing it much now either, but given the international context that I presently live in, these subjects became more common, I have to say. And they make you think about similarities… and differences… and opportunities” (Diana N., 20).

Furthermore, meeting new people and making new foreign friends were highly significant in reducing or accentuating the sense of otherness which, ultimately, has lead to European iden-
tity feelings, according to some of the interviewed students. The next two quotes are relevant for each of these opposing situations, both of them made possible by the foreign study sojourn: “By having the opportunity to interact with other European students we learnt that we were not that different, in the end. I mean, there are differences from country to country, but not all of them are significant. Students are students everywhere” (Alexandra S., 19); “I felt European and proud of this status as compared to other non-European students… I cannot say exactly why, I just felt so” (Andrei I., 21).

Arising from the findings presented above is the idea that the foreign academic sojourn proved to be a “transformative” experience for many of the surveyed Romanian students in what their sense of Europeanness is concerned. Put differently, attending their university degree in the UK affected our respondents’ support for the European project (in the positive way), being also relevant in enhancing European identity feelings among them. In this sense, we may argue that for most of the Romanian students that were interviewed for the present research the long-term sojourn abroad may be depicted as one of the main sources of their European identity feelings which were understood and conceptualized rather civically and instrumentally.

7. Limitations of the study

Though qualitative analyses are much more insightful than quantitative methodologies (De Fina, 2003), the methodological limitations of a study based on in depth interviewing must also be mentioned. Among them, the most significant ones are: the relatively reduced number of respondents and the personal, subjective character of the collected data. It is important to specify that even if the information obtained at this level is accurate and relevant for the theme of the paper, it is also private and based on a particular context.

Another limit of the present study is the “subject bias” of the respondents. Specifically, in the selection of the relevant students, there were no efforts made in order to eliminate or diminish the risk of subject bias, by not recruiting respondents from “risky” disciplines such as social sciences and humanities. This means that, to some extent, Romanian students’ attitudes and answers might have been influenced by their degree specialization.

Furthermore, a limit that must also be mentioned here is represented by the geographical distance between us and our respondents. In this sense, we had to use some on-line programs to communicate with them. Thus, we had used the Internet application Skype in order to create both audio and video contact with participants in our research. In this context, the absence of a face to face contact can be also considered an impediment in finding out detailed information concerning the subject of our research.

8. Summary and conclusions

As mentioned from the beginning, the present paper was undertaken among young Romanian students who have chosen to fulfill their university degree in British universities. It aimed to highlight the influence that the study experience exerted on students’ identity feelings, emphasizing their European layer of identity and the circumstances favoring its assum-
ing. Hence, we were interested to capture if, when trying to integrate into the host society, our respondents experienced mainly a European level of identification, a national one, both or some other identifications. Furthermore, we wanted to analyze the relationship between these various identity levels and to see if they were opposing to some extent or rather complementing each other very well.

Overall, the present study showed that the surveyed students articulated several types of identities, which were highlighted according to specific circumstances. Among them, respondents predominantly mentioned the national sense of self, the international student identity, and the European identity. Analyzing the contexts that emphasized different facets of identity and also considering students’ self conceptualizations regarding the terms “European” and “European identity”, it is clear that the instrumental and civic approaches to Europe have a quite good support in our study too. In different words, though there were some respondents who talked about Europe in terms of a common culture, civilization and origin, most of the students perceived their own Europeanness by means of several economic advantages that were available to them recently, once with Romania’s membership into the Union. Among these economic benefits students enumerated: the possibility to study in England (and anywhere abroad), the opportunity to take a loan for their studies from the British government, the free movement right which allows them to travel freely, with the ID card only, lower study taxes etc.

It is important to state that respondents’ self perceptions and identifications were often influenced by the way they were perceived or labeled by the people they interacted with – either locals (British), internationals from all over the world or co-nationals. In this sense, in some cases students actualized a European sense of self as a consequence of the fact they were perceived as Europeans in the foreign environment.

Regarding the relationship between the various collective identifications, empirical results showed that feelings of Europeanness are not usually incompatible with national or other loyalties for participants in this study. Very often, as this paper reveals, the national level of loyalty was much stronger than the European one, but this doesn’t mean that the weaker level was entirely eclipsed. Instead, students’ primary loyalties were, in most cases, to their nation and, at the same time, some of them felt attached to EU and Europe, fact that allows us to sustain our theoretical assumption that different identities do not necessarily exclude or oppose each other.

Concerning the influence that the educational sojourning experience exerted on the surveyed students’ European identity feelings, our research reported that most respondents draw, in fact, a causal relationship between studying and residing abroad and feeling European. In this sense, most of the interviewed students revealed that the simple “chance” of attending higher education in a different country made them feel and self-categorize as Europeans. Additionally, all the other benefits deriving from their decision to spend their degree programme at an institution in another EU Member State (such as the possibility of taking a loan from a foreign government, the opportunity to meet and interact with so many different people, the fact of being perceived as Europeans by their counterparts in Europe and treated as having the same rights as any other citizens in the EU – with very few exceptions – the lack of the right to work there) were strongly associated by participants in this study with the markers of a common European identity.

As far as further research is concerned, we believe that it is important and necessary that subsequent works undertake an international comparative dimension. In the context of the subject we approached in this paper, a very interesting perspective could be offered by compar-
Lucrarea aduce în prim plan studenți români care au finalizat recent sau sunt pe cale de a-și finaliza studiile universitare în Marea Britanie și își propune să surprindă influența pe care experiența în străinătate o exercită la nivelul identității studențiilor. Mai exact, cercetarea prezintă explorarea modul în care diferitele “paliere” ale identității studențiilor sunt activate și devin proeminente în perioada sejurului academic, cu accent pe sentimentele de apartenență națională și europeană, dar și pe identificarea situațiilor care favorizează asumarea acestora. Lucrarea are trei obiective principale: să arate dacă participanții în acest studiu au simțit identitate națională sau europeană; să prezinte modul în care identitatea națională funcționează în raport cu cea europeană; să exploreze influența pe care experiența educațională, socială și culturală au exercitat asupra identificării studențiilor români ca europeni.

Deși, după cum se arată în cercetările de factură recentă, practicile de studii în străinătate sunt profund legate de emergența unui sentiment de identitate europeană în rândul tinerilor (Green, 2007; Fligstein, 2008, 2009; Favell, 2009), aceste idei teoretice sunt rareori susținute de dovezi empirice. În plus, experiențele studențiilor din state recent integrate în Uniune, cum ar fi România, sunt insuficient aduse în discuție și analizate. În acest context, prin intermediul a 15 interviuri semistructurate în profunzime, prezentul lucru va concentră asupra percepțiilor personale despre identitatea națională și a identității europene în rândul participanților la acest studiu.

Cuvinte-cheie: identitate națională; identitate europeană; studii universitare în străinătate; studenți români; contexte interculturale.

Bibliography


