

Τα Ευρωπαϊκά Προγράμματα στη Δευτεροβάθμια Εκπαίδευση ως φορέας συγκρότησης της Ευρωπαϊκής Ταυτότητας

European Identity Development through European School Projects: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: In recent years, the European Union (EU) has confronted significant challenges, reigniting debates surrounding the establishment of a cohesive European identity. Scholars emphasizing the importance of forging a European identity, argue that it plays a crucial role in establishing legitimacy and facilitating the future political integration of the EU. This article endeavors to investigate the influence of school European projects on the formation of a European identity. Specifically, the research aims to elucidate the factors contributing to the development of European identity and the potential preconceived stereotypes held by students involved in European mobility projects. Employing a qualitative research approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with former and current students of a Greek lyceum possessing extensive experience in European student mobility initiatives. The survey spanned from October 2022 to March 2023, providing valuable insights into the intricate relationship between European projects and the shaping of European identity.

Keywords: European Identity, Stereotypes, European Projects, Secondary Education

Περίληψη: Τα τελευταία χρόνια, η Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση (ΕΕ) έχει αντιμετωπίσει σημαντικές προκλήσεις, αναζωπυρώνοντας τις συζητήσεις γύρω από τη δημιουργία μιας συνεκτικής ευρωπαϊκής ταυτότητας. Οι ερευνητές, υπογραμμίζοντας τη σημασία της σφυρηλάτησης μιας ευρωπαϊκής ταυτότητας, υποστηρίζουν ότι διαδραματίζει κρίσιμο ρόλο στην εδραίωση της νομιμότητας και στη διευκόλυνση της μελλοντικής πολιτικής ολοκλήρωσης της ΕΕ. Αυτό το άρθρο προσπαθεί να διερευνήσει την επίδραση των σχολικών ευρωπαϊκών προγραμμάτων στη διαμόρφωση μιας ευρωπαϊκής ταυτότητας. Συγκεκριμένα, η έρευνα στοχεύει να αποσαφηνίσει τους παράγοντες που συμβάλλουν στην ανάπτυξη της ευρωπαϊκής ταυτότητας και να καταγράψει τα πιθανά στερεότυπα των μαθητών που συμμετέχουν σε ευρωπαϊκά προγράμματα κινητικότητας. Χρησιμοποιώντας μια ποιοτική ερευνητική προσέγγιση, συλλέχθηκαν δεδομένα μέσω ημιδομημένων συνεντεύξεων πρώην και νυν ελλήνων μαθητών που συμμετείχαν σε σχολικά ευρωπαϊκά προγράμματα. Η έρευνα διήρκεσε από τον Οκτώβριο του 2022 έως τον Μάρτιο του 2023, παρέχοντας πολύτιμες γνώσεις σχετικά με την περίπλοκη σχέση μεταξύ ευρωπαϊκών έργων και τη διαμόρφωση της ευρωπαϊκής ταυτότητας.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Ευρωπαϊκή Ταυτότητα, Στερεότυπα, Ευρωπαϊκά Προγράμματα, Δευτεροβάθμια Εκπαίδευση.

Introduction

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has faced challenges that have prompted discussions about the foundation of a European identity (Chaniotis, 2022). Numerous studies underscore the significance of nurturing a European identity for fostering adherence to shared norms and collective actions (Deutch et al., 1957; Haas, 1958). Authors advocating for the cultivation of a European identity emphasize its pivotal role in conferring legitimacy and promoting the future political integration of the EU (Herrmann et al., 2004; Kohli, 2000; Risse, 2003). In this framework, European identity is defined as the shared sense of belonging among a community, wherein collectively endorsed decisions gain legitimacy and rationality (Bellamy & Castiglione, 1998:163). Respectively, the absence of a shared European identity is closely associated with concerns about a democratic deficit and a lack of legitimacy within the EU (Herrmann et al., 2004; Risse, 2003).

1. Identity and Stereotypes

The concept of identity is intricate and multidimensional, often a subject of extensive discourse. Giddens (2006) provides a definition of identity as the distinctive attributes that delineate an individual or a collective entity. This definition underscores the pivotal role played by delineating boundaries that set apart those who are not part of the given entity, a notion that has been further elucidated by Bauman (2001:124). So identity is relational rather than an isolated element; it revolves not primarily around "who I am" but rather "who I am in relation to others" (Χαρχαρού, 2017). This perspective often raises the additional question of "how should I act," which delves into the realm of ethical considerations (Θεοδωρίδης, 2015).

Expressions of identity can extend to the individual, group, or societal levels. Processes at the individual level are intricately linked with those at the group and societal levels, whereby individuals' affiliations with various social groups are subject to influence by intergroup dynamics and personal attributes (Δραγώνα, 2007). These dynamics can function either as cohesive elements within a group or as distinguishing factors when juxtaposed with other groups, ultimately shaping the character of a specific group. Stereotypes play a pivotal role in the process of self-awareness and differentiation between "us" and "them" (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Stereotypes are commonly defined as preconceived notions or simplified perceptions of individuals or social groups; they often involve beliefs about the characteristics and behaviors of members of specific social groups (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996). These stereotypes portray all members of a particular group as sharing the same traits, setting them apart from other groups.

Stereotypes can be understood in both negative and constructive ways. Negatively, they are perceived as simplistic and potentially discriminatory when applied to a social category. Positively, stereotypes are viewed as part of a cognitive, semantic, or social structure, serving as necessary means to simplify reality when transitioning from perceptual experience to comprehension. Interactions and collaborations between groups, under certain conditions, have the potential to alter their respective stereotypes, diluting or even erasing them (Goin, 2023).

2. European identity

The discussion of features that define European identity began in the 1970s and gained prominence in the early 1990s. Despite decades of debate, the concept of European identity remains elusive and subject to disagreement (Risse et al., 2001; Risse, 2005). There is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes a European identity, and various perspectives on Europe differ not only among nations but also within nations (Malmborg and Stråth, 2002). Psychogiou (2015) suggests that social constructivism provides a useful framework for understanding European identity. Social constructivism posits that identity is not predetermined at birth or solely a result of rational choices. Identity, including the European, is viewed as constructed through social interactions and processes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Diverse viewpoints regarding European identity are present in scholarly literature. In this study two significant perspectives on the development of European identity are explored. One is anchored in cultural values, while the other centers on civic and political principles, often referred to as political identity, or as described by Maragoudakis (2022), '*ethos*' and '*epos*.'

On one hand, the cultural community perspective envisions Europe based on ethno-cultural factors that have evolved over a long historical process (Ruiz Jiménez, 2004; Psychogiou, 2015). It revolves around a shared cultural heritage, languages with common roots, religious affiliations, historical experiences, and emotional connections. This cultural aspect should be viewed as a symbiotic relationship between European identity and national identities, rather than as opposing forces (Psychogiou, 2015). On a broader scale, the diverse cultural orientations in Europe stem from the coexistence of various cultural traditions that operate in a state of ongoing interaction and competition rather than being hierarchically organized (Maragoudakis, 2022). In addition, European civilization was influenced by numerous external factors that persisted to varying degrees throughout different historical periods. This has led to a complex framework within the European symbolic space, encompassing both independent European values and those integrated from non-European sources (Gołembski 2012). However, it's important to note that a significant number of researchers criticize the idea of a homogeneous European culture (Berendeev, 2012; Shore, 2017; Hanshew, 2008).

On the other hand, the political community perspective views Europe as a community sharing democratic practices and principles, grounded in agreements for peaceful political coexistence. This alternative perspective proposes a post-national European identity grounded in constitutional patriotism. This perspective encompasses Western European constitutional

culture, emphasizing democracy, human dignity, freedom, equality, the rule of law, human rights, peace, tolerance, pluralism, solidarity, self-determination, ecological awareness, diversity tolerance, freedom of expression, peaceful conflict resolution, and an independent judiciary (Habermas, 1992; Maragoudakis, 2022). It serves as a foundation for building European identity by linking European ideals with civic values such as solidarity and cohesion, ultimately leading to rights and obligations derived from European laws and treaties (Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010).

Berendeev (2012) and Shore (2017) contend that the values typically associated with Europe are, in reality, universal and globally applicable. They perceive European identity as inherently detached from specific geographical confines, rendering it incapable of uniquely defining the distinctiveness of a single continent. However, in the contemporary global context, if the foundational elements of European identity are no longer exclusive to Europe, it is not due to their initial sharing with other societies. Instead, this lack of exclusivity arises from the successful process of "extraction" and assimilation of these elements into various other regions around the world (Maragoudakis, 2022:96).

3. EU incentives for European identity

European identity holds a significant political importance, as highlighted by Maragoudakis (2022). It represents a deliberate objective pursued by European institutions, evident in political documents of the EU (Bee, 2008). For the European Union (EU), securing a European identity is crucial for the future of the European unity and integration.

Moreover, European identity plays a pivotal role in managing the cultural consequences of eastward enlargement. For many, behind the concept of European Identity lies the cultural impact of the Union's expansion, particularly the eastward enlargement. During the Cold War era, Eastern Europe was often portrayed as a region of "regression" (Sträth, 2002). However, following the end of the Cold War and the continued eastward expansion in 2004 and 2007, the EU was compelled to redefine its position and the moral and spiritual underpinnings of its integration according to Havel (2000). In such a political climate, European Identity once again emerged as the linchpin for bridging the gap between Eastern and Western Europeans and uniting them within the culturally secure realm of "European" (Tekiner, 2020). According to Bruter, the implicit rationale behind the European institutions' efforts to establish a comprehensive set of symbols for the European Union was to strengthen citizens' sense of belonging to this new political community. Even the Erasmus program, considered by many as a phenomenon inspiring European identity, functions as a policy tool in this regard (Bruter, 2003: 1152).

3.1. Political integration and European mobility

The significance of collective identities is on the rise within the context of European integration (Kuhn, 2015) as identity politics and mass political engagement are becoming more prominent (De Wilde & Zürn, 2012). Two predominant trends in this regard involve a "systemic" dimension concerning vertical interactions between the European system and citizens, as highlighted in Ernst Haas' neo-functional theory (1958), and an "identity" dimension involving horizontal interactions among citizens from different countries, as per Karl Deutsch's "transactional" perspective (1957).

Ernst Haas' neo-functional theory of European integration suggests that the formation of a collective European identity is a consequence of European integration which Haas characterizes as a 'shift' of 'trust' from nation-states to the European level of decision-making (Haas, 1958).

In contrast, Karl Deutsch's "Transactionalism," also known as Communication Theory (Deutsch, 1952; Deutsch et al., 1957), focus to a "sense of community" among citizens characterized by mutual trust and a shared "we" feeling. According to Deutsch, intensifying communication through personal interactions and social engagement among citizens from different countries is essential for creating 'security communities' (Deutsch et al., 1957). His theory posits that increased socialization leads to a stronger sense of connection among individuals, reducing prejudices, and reinforcing shared interests (Fernández et al., 2016). This sense of connection gives rise to a common identity, based on shared values, beliefs, and attitudes, ultimately emerging from social interactions. Recent studies corroborate these principles, demonstrating that a broad international orientation correlates with greater identification with Europe (Fligstein, 2008; Kuhn, 2011, 2012; Sigalas, 2010).

Deutsch's theory strongly supports the idea that mobility programs can stimulate social assimilation processes, leading to integration. This social assimilation is a personal-level phenomenon where interpersonal contact and interactions bridge the social gaps between individuals of different nationalities, thus contributing to the formation of a shared identity (Büttner & Mau, 2010). This theory places a greater emphasis on the social aspects of integration, as opposed to the political and economic aspects (Nardella, 2021).

Fligstein (2008), drawing on the same theoretical framework, elucidates how European identity can develop through face-to-face interactions among individuals from diverse social backgrounds, recognizing the value of institutionalized cross-border mobility and transnational communication. He argues that interpersonal connections among Europeans diminish their perception of each other as foreigners solely based on nationality, progressively nurturing shared interests. This process ultimately results in a stronger identification as Europeans rather than merely maintaining a national identity (Fligstein, 2008).

In the European context the elimination of intra-European borders and the promotion of social interactions within the EU provide fertile ground for the development of a shared European identity. European mobility programs, such as Erasmus, exemplify activities that facilitate

people-to-people connections (Kuhn, 2015). These programs create conditions for individuals to engage with others, share experiences, encourage mutual recognition, and nurture a sense of belonging. These simple, everyday interactions and intersubjective experiences play a pivotal role in shaping identity (Ghislen, 2004). According to Kuhn (2011), programs like Erasmus are prime examples of activities within the EU that facilitate social assimilation processes, ultimately contributing to integration. This social assimilation unfolds at the individual level, where personal contact and interactions work to diminish social distances between people from different nationalities, aiding in the formation of a common identity (Büttner & Mau, 2010). Importantly, this process is bottom-up, not reliant on federal institutions, agencies, or mechanisms for securing peace among nations (Nardella, 2021). It centers on social integration, emphasizing increased interaction, communication, movement, and contact among individuals from diverse backgrounds. This approach aims to build transnational communities and promote greater social interaction among people, fostering trust and goodwill, making the idea of conflict inconceivable (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2006).

Within the realm of European integration, policies have been designed to enhance citizens' identification with the EU's political system and foster a common European identity. But as the EU respects the principle of subsidiarity, the making of education policy has always been a feat of compromise, contestation, and consensus, between the EU and member states, and within the EU institutions (Alexiadou & Rambla, 2022). Over time, the EU has shifted its focus to human capital (Alexiadou & Jones, 2019), concentrating on cultivating a European identity through educational programs that encourage collaboration and mobility among the educational institutions of Member States, acknowledging the Member States' responsibility for their education systems. The EU implements numerous European projects related to education, training, and culture, with the goal of inspiring European identity (Bruter, 2003).

4. Research Questions

Despite an abundance of research on European Projects and their role in shaping European identity, the ever-evolving circumstances within the EU—brought about by crises, austerity measures, conflicts, pandemics, climate change, and events like Brexit—give rise to uncertainties regarding shifts in identity dynamics.

Furthermore, the majority of existing studies focus on higher education. But even in these cases, there is a lack of consensus among scientists and the results are sometimes even contradictory. Several authors, recognizing the research gap, point to the need for more empirical studies (Ambrosi, 2013; Sigalas, 2010; Van Mol, 2011; Van Mol, 2013) and qualitative research (Ambrosi, 2013; Van Mol, 2013). According to Kuhn (2012), there is a need for further investigation at younger ages, those of school age. It seems that young people, who are in higher education, are likely to already feel more European, regardless of a possible study exchange abroad (Kuhn, 2012). The exchange period has the potential to work positively, in terms of European identity and EU goals, only if it is aimed at younger ages. According to the literature

review and the theoretical framework, it seems that there is not enough research related to the connection of European identity formation in school students, especially in relation to their participation in European programs. Thus, this study focuses on the following research questions:

1. Does the involvement of secondary school students in European projects enhance the development of their European identity?
2. Does engagement in European programs influence students' pre-existing (if any) stereotypes of other European cultures and peoples?

5. Methodological approach

The above mentioned research questions are related to the formation of the European Identity, the possibly preformed stereotypes of students in relation to their participation in European mobility programs. As the mechanisms linking European Identity and participation in transnational mobilities are not known a priori and the literature review highlights contradictions, the qualitative method was chosen as the most appropriate to explore the underlying pathways of whether and how transnational mobilities may influence the formation of the European identity of students who take part in European mobility programs. Thus this study was based on a qualitative research method and semi-structured interviews were used, in order to answer the research questions as these are considered more suitable for approaching social phenomena for which it is not completely clear and known which variables influence them. The interviewees (Table 1) were chosen through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2011; Mason, 2011), selecting individuals who could provide a rich source of information for a comprehensive understanding and clarification of the phenomenon being investigated. In this context, a Greek Lyceum (upper secondary) was chosen, the 2nd General Lyceum of Kos, which has participated in a large number of mobility projects from 2013 until today, both as a partner and as a coordinator.

Each year, the school forms a pedagogical team composed of Erasmus teachers responsible for overseeing all program-related activities and decisions. This educational team also plays a pivotal role in selecting the students who will participate in the Erasmus projects as well as in their guidance.

In addition to regular school hours, the team conducts meetings and carries out various tasks to fulfill the school's obligations within each program. Upon their return, the students who participated in mobility activities remain engaged through follow-up activities, continuing to collaborate within the group. They also prepare for forthcoming activities, potential hosting, and arrangements for accommodating partner institutions in their home town.

The approach taken in organizing the mobility activities regarding accommodation involved students staying in the homes of their counterparts from another European country for a week. Similarly, during the meetings in Greece, they hosted a student from a partner country. The

students initiated personal communication well in advance, which resulted in a basic level of familiarity established during their time living together.

Former and active students of 2nd lyceum of Kos, who participated in Comenius and Erasmus+ programs, from 2013 to 2023, were approached. The survey started in October 2022 and ended in March 2023.

Table 1. Interviewers

Interviewees	Countries of mobility	Year of birth	Education level during the research
M1	Spain, UK	2003	University
M2	Denmark, UK	2002	University
M3	Italy, France-Belgium	2002	University
M4	Italy, Sweden	2005	Lyceum
M5	Slovakia	2006	Lyceum
M6	Spain, Poland	2005	Lyceum
M7	Poland, Germany	1998	University MSc
M8	Poland, Spain	2001	University
M9	Slovakia, UK, Denmark, Portugal	2002	Technical University
M10	Spain, Sweden, Poland, Germany	1999	Technical University PhD
M11	Slovakia, Sweden	2007	Lyceum
M12	Sweden	2007	Lyceum
M13	Italy	2004	Technical University
M14	Spain, Poland, Denmark, UK	2002	Technical University

6. Research Results: 1st research question

This specific research focused on the opinions of 14 former and active students, who participated in European programs, Comenius and Erasmus+ for school education, during their studies in secondary level. The **first research question examined if the engagement of secondary school students in European projects facilitates the cultivation of their European identity**. Conclusions were derived by the analysis, related to common values, the importance of the EU, the self determination and change/transformation of the students' identity and beliefs, the existence of double identities.

Related to common values, the majority of survey participants believe that Europeans share common values. This is a pertinent excerpt from an interview that illustrates this point:

M2: "Although with the children we came into contact with and developed friendships and bonds with there was a difference in language, nationality and the way we grew up, there were not so many things that separated us, because we were the same age, we had common interests, common learning and cognitive level and similar influences e.g. from the Internet. We got pretty close pretty quickly."

Related to the importance of the EU, after participating in Erasmus, most participants tend to be more likely to consider themselves as EU citizens, believe they have more in common with other Europeans and show greater pride in being European. These are some illustrative excerpts from interviews that demonstrate this aspect:

M4: "The EU as a political and economic alliance that ensures peace between member states ... as a political entity Europe is something unique."

M1: "I really felt what European Union means ... its existence is very important ... more important than we think..."

M10: "I can't imagine what it would be like without the EU, what the relations among the countries would be like..."

M3: "For me the EU is very important. Perhaps because of my studies and what I have learned about uniqueness and the difficulties to create something so original. It brings us closer to other Europeans but also to our roots..."

There were also opportunistic perspectives of the EU, as can be shown in this excerpt:

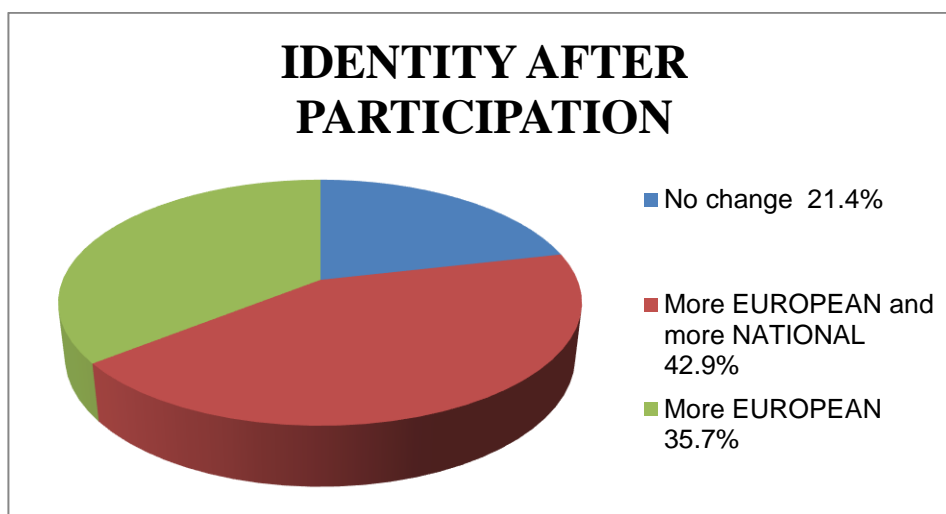
M4: "I like Europe very much... It makes it easier for us to travel, it makes it easier for us in telecommunications, in laws, it protects us..."

Related to the self determination of the students' identity, when the students were asked how they define themselves, most participants (5) answered that they have both Greek and European identities, 3 answered Greek more but there is also a European one, 2 answered both, 2 only Greek identity and 2 answered neither. These are excerpts from interviews that illustrate this point:

M4: "Europe for me is an identity, I feel European, I am European and I act like that. I also feel my national identity, as much as I feel Greek, I also feel European."

M13: "Before the trip I felt more Greek... I had no European experience, only experiences with tourists..."

In relation to their beliefs about the transformation of their identity after participating in the projects, the students discovered that they have more in common with other Europeans than they had thought before their participation. The graph 2 illustrates how the participants perceive their sense of identity to have changed in relation to their participation in the program and the exchanges.



Graph 2: Identity change after participation

Participation in the program offered opportunities for information and related experiences. It offered a sense of European entity and European citizenship beyond the national horizon and the following excerpts from interviews illustrate this point:

M13: "After the trip I felt quite European, my horizons opened up..."

M14: "...I feel that I gained a greater awareness of my position after seeing the other Europeans... after the trips I feel more European... if I hadn't gone I don't know if I would have felt European... In Greece only Eurovision reminds that we are part of Europe... »

Some of the participants consider that the change in the formation of their identity took place mainly because of the possibilities of information about the EU and familiarity with the European perspective. These excerpts demonstrates this aspect:

M2: "I definitely felt more European because we probably didn't know many things. »

M8: "Before I did not know and had not dealt with the EU. The program helped me to feel more European, to get closer to the EU, to see that even with a person from Portugal or from Sweden, we have something in common... through this I felt more European...Before I had no experience, only the European elections..."

M9: "...I came into contact with the European culture, the EU, I have a higher appreciation of what it does for us, which when you are a student in Greece and never participate in any foreign/European action, you don't think that the EU offers you much and you feel a little cut off from her..."

From the answers of some participants, it seems that the experience of the exchange brought them closer to Europe. These excerpts illustrate this:

M6: "Before traveling I felt more Greek... But when I started traveling and saw other cultures, the cultures, the commonalities we have but also the differences, I started to feel European."

M9: "I feel much more European now, I have experienced European culture and EU..."

M10: "The most important experience was that you lived in a house, that was the main experience... I have done so many trips and I have not had the opportunity, nor will I be given the opportunity to do so. A week of ERASMUS is more important than a month of vacation. You may see a lot more things in this month, but you won't learn the real life of the country"

Related to the feeling of a double identity, some participants stated that they feel they have two identities and they described the relationship between these:

M3: "The travel experience made me feel more European, after all it was a European program. We have so much in common, and although I come from a small island and the others from a city of 10 million. At the same time I got closer to my roots...because I felt the need to promote my country I feel in the middle, many times I feel Greek and others very European, I want to get away from traditional Greek stereotypes and be more progressive."

And in some cases the two identities are not only in conflict but one reinforces the other:

M10: "I feel more Greek, I feel much more familiar with Greece and with a Greek identity but at the same time I have a broader, fainter European identity, it is also strong but the Greek is stronger and more important and is included in the European. I think that to some extent the European strengthens the Greek one. Without the European one, I don't think you can have a completely Greek one."

M6: "I feel more Greek than I used to because I saw what it means to be Greek in other countries, what Hellenism means, what it has given and how other countries see us. But I also feel European because I understand what other countries have given me, both as a person and as Greek citizen. Before I was simply a European woman from Greece without knowing what Europe means, what the EU means, and without knowing what Hellenic means."

7. Research Results: 2nd research question

The second research question examined to what extent does participation in European programs influence students' potential preconceptions about other European cultures and peoples. Conclusions were derived by the analysis, related to the stereotypical perceptions the students already had, some of their views that were overturned, some specific perceptions about

European countries that had a Soviet influence, about the North and the South of Europe, about Greece in particular, about prospects and possibilities and study choices that emerge and general impressions about the European programs such as Erasmus+.

Taking into account all the interviews, it appears that the majority of students (71%) admit that they had stereotypical perceptions before their participation in the program in relation to the inhabitants or the daily life of at least one other European country. Some of these views changed and these are examples of views and stereotypes that for some were completely overturned:

M5: "I had stereotypes but they were completely wrong. My idea about people and countries changed."

M14: "I expected something different from movies, but in the end we have many things in common..."

A common stereotype that emerged in this research concerned the countries of central Europe, formerly under Soviet influence. Considering Eastern European countries, most students were surprised with Poland and Slovakia, both in terms of the urban landscape, infrastructure and living standards. And in fact the stereotypes, the surprise and the reversal of perceptions were greater for those who traveled earlier in time to this country such as M7 who traveled to Poland in 2013, which probably reflects the rapid development of Poland in particular but also of the other members of the former Soviet bloc EU in this decade.

The most widespread stereotypical perception in the surveys is based on the categorization according to the geographical area, especially about the differences between North and South. How the Mediterranean peoples are more "open", "warm" and "hospitable" while the northerners are considered "Remote" and "cold". This appeared to be the view of most of the interviewees before participating in the program, but eventually the vast majority changed their view. Yet there were also a few participants who felt that their initial assessments were confirmed, if only with a degree of doubt.

Some students from other European countries also had stereotypical perceptions about Greeks and Greece, as seen in this excerpt:

M1: "Sometimes there are some negative stereotypes in relation to Greece and the Greeks and some positive ones for example about Greek hospitality, which are confirmed... The main negative stereotype was that our financial problem is due to laziness... something that was overturned during the hospitality, when they lived in our houses and saw our parents, how they worked and their schedules..."

Some participants emphasize the formation of a cohesive group within the Greek school, akin to an Erasmus community. This collective shares common experiences, responsibilities, and codes of conduct. It is related to the Erasmus group of students that the school formed every year in order to cope with its obligations in relation to the European projects. Within this group, project commitments, relationships, connections, and shared norms are nurtured and solidified

through intense collaborative experiences outside of regular school hours. These are pertinent excerpts from interviews that illustrate this point:

M3: "My fellow Greek students and I got closer. We experienced this whole new thing together and became closer. More substantial and quality contact..."

M12: "Before the trip we used to say hello ... but during the trip we became very close ... we still go out ... now we have something more in common ... bonds were created that others don't understand. ... we talk about things we did in Sweden and only we understand ..."

M13: "... during the hosting in Kos I built very good friendships ... we became very close to our family"

M14: "Among our group there was a climate of mutual help and cooperation...a sense of community..."

For two of the participants the involvement with the program and some specific trips became a source of inspiration and influenced their study choices after High School.

M3: "I gained a lot of knowledge...they influenced my choice of studies. We learned a lot about Europe and the European Parliament and how things work. I was quite influenced in choosing my studies..."

M2: "The trip to England and London made me love English language and culture even more and maybe influenced me a little in my choice of studies..."

By engaging in program activities, a majority of participants (77%) expressed a heightened awareness of the opportunities available to them beyond Greek borders. Simultaneously, they found that the prospect of a short or extended visit or stay in another European country became more attainable.

M2: "I definitely want to go abroad for a master's degree and even to work, but my future is in Greece."

M9: "I could definitely live abroad. Certainly these experiences have made this transition much easier for me. Much more accessible...I definitely find the EU more approachable after this experience....So ERASMUS is a very good opportunity to see that you have and are given opportunities through the EU"

M1: "After the visits to the European countries I saw that it is not something scary to move abroad...You can adapt easily and the people there are not aliens. I will aim to study abroad and participate in Erasmus at university."

M13: "I realized that after all it is not something extreme to go to another country. (After the program I am) even more open to the possibility of going somewhere abroad for studies or for work..."

M4: "When you know this whole world, all these things, you understand that we are not Kos, we are not the Dodecanese, we are not Greece, we are Europe, we are the world, I don't need

to limit myself, limit my career to Greece, I don't need to study in Greece, I don't need to imagine and create a life in Greece, I can do that in any country in the world if I want."

For many of the participants the Erasmus experience was beyond their expectations:

M11: "Before I went I thought that everyone would be distant, I wouldn't be able to talk to anyone and I would only be with the Greeks."

M10: "I didn't expect to feel such hospitality and cordiality and family warmth."

M2: "It was definitely better than I expected."

M11: "In Slovakia I expected them to be kind and welcoming but in Sweden I didn't expect that and finally in Sweden they were even more welcoming and kind."

The experience of hospitality and the speed of adaptation and acquisition of at least a tolerable degree of familiarity in a cross-cultural environment is perceived differently by each participant, whether it is hosting them in another country or welcoming other Europeans into their homeland. But almost everyone recognizes the importance of experience and its influence on their personality, as seen in these excerpts:

M13: "I came back and thought I had found a part of myself that I didn't even know existed..."

M7: "I think it's awesome that this option existed... In my opinion, all schools should have something like this, I find it incredible... All schools should offer such an opportunity."

8. Conclusions

In this research, an attempt was made to investigate the possible impact of European programs on the formation of the European identity of the students of a public General Lyceum school in the island of Kos (Dodecanese Islands, Greece), with ten years of experience in EU programs. In addition, an attempt was made to detect stereotypes and their eventual/potential change after the participation of the students in European programs.

The respondents were high school students, university students, graduates and postgraduates who as school students had taken part in Comenius and/or Erasmus+ programs. This research focused on social interactions in the context of student mobility and the role they can play in the emergence of a European identity. The answers of the respondents showed that the majority of the participants in the research believe that by participating in the European programs it strengthened their European identity, it made them define themselves more as European citizens.

Before their participation, the majority of the interviewees defined themselves with both identities, with a subset of them considering that the national takes precedence over the European. After their participation in Erasmus, most participants declared a strengthening of their European identity and for some of them the Greek identity was strengthened at the same time. The majority of respondents state that they share common values with other Europeans,

consider themselves EU citizens and are proud of it. They recognize the importance of the EU mainly because of the facilities, security and protection it offers them.

A key factor that contributed to the change of views on identity was, according to the respondents' answers, the opportunities to be informed about European issues that their participation in the program offered them. Getting to know the structure of the EU, its work and the perspectives offered in the European space, brought Greek students closer to their European identity.

Another factor, emerging from the responses of the sample, that significantly influenced the change in the formation of the European identity, was the experiences and opportunities of social interaction with other Europeans. The exchange experience gave them a sense of European entity and European citizenship beyond the national horizon.

The perspectives of interviewees who affirm their dual affinity and identification with both European and national identities hold considerable significance. Equally noteworthy is their perception of the interplay between these two identities. In certain instances, rather than being mutually exclusive or conflicting, these identities not only coexist harmoniously but also mutually reinforce each other.

In relation to stereotypes, the majority of respondents (71%) admit that they had stereotypical perceptions before their participation in the program, in relation to the inhabitants or the daily life of at least one other European country or region.

A broad stereotypical perception that emerged in this research concerned the countries of central Europe, formerly under Soviet influence. The big surprise was the similarities they presented with the familiar culture, Poland and Slovakia. These similarities mainly concerned the urban landscape, infrastructure, living standards and family relationships and bonds.

The widespread, in the literature, stereotypical perception which is based on the categorization according to the geographical region, northerners and southerners, was present. Northerners are seen as 'distant', and 'cold' in contrast to southerners, as reflected in interviewees' views prior to their participation in the program and in this survey. After participation, negative stereotypes were overwhelmingly overturned, but there were also cases where participants felt that their initial assessments were confirmed, even with a degree of probability. The confirmation mainly related to the positive stereotypical perceptions of the warm and welcoming behavior of the Mediterranean peoples. The southerners still remain in the worldview of most as more 'warm' and 'open'.

Some students from various European countries who visited Greece appear to have harbored both favorable and unfavorable stereotypes about the nation and its people. Remarkably, their firsthand experiences confirmed the positive stereotypes regarding Greek hospitality and warm reception. Simultaneously, any negative preconceived notions, such as stereotypes suggesting Greek laziness, were dispelled as they experienced firsthand the Greek way of life and integration into the local culture.

In summary, the expected by the E.U. and confirmed by research (Sauzet, 2008; Almarza et al., 2017; Cairns et al., 2018) de-stereotyping through social interaction appears to be achieved to a significant extent. Participation in the program seems to eliminate the negative stereotypes, but some of the positive ones remain after their confirmation as reported by Llurda et al. (2016) and Karagianni (2020).

Through the program, both during the preparation and the visits to the other European countries, the interviewees were given the opportunity to learn more about Europe but also about the structure and functioning of the EU, an area in which there seems to be a great deficit for many Europeans (Wilkins et al. 2010).

Another important result that emerged from the research was the creation of an Erasmus community within the school. The creation of a group within the school to deal with the obligations of the European programs and the members staying and participating in it throughout the duration of the program (usually 2 years) created a kind of community within the school, with particular bonds and common codes.

For many of the participants the Erasmus experience was beyond their expectations. The entire sample recognizes the importance of experience and its influence on their personality. For some it became a source of inspiration and influenced their choice of study after graduation and for some the place of study, helping them familiarize themselves with the idea of relocation and demystifying the magnitude of the difficulties. They got to know better the perspectives that open up to them outside the walls and the possibility of moving to another country in Europe became more accessible.

In the context of European integration, the implementation of policies is attempted, with the aim of consolidating the identification of citizens and creating a common European identity. The European Programs stand out as one of the few EU initiatives that actually bring about bottom-up change (Bracht et al., 2006). For the future of the European unity and integration, it is important to ensure the presence of European identity as its existence ensures legitimacy (Checkel & Katzenstein 2009; Phsychoyiou, 2015). In contemporary Europe, of difference and diversity, a European identity may not be exclusive, may be weaker than national identities, but may be more capable of contributing to a democratic form of global governance, in terms of mutual understanding, peaceful relations and multi-level cooperation (Maragoudakis, 2022).

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