Paper prepared for the Second Euroacademia Global Conference

Europe Inside-Out: Europe and Europeaness Exposed to Plural Observers,

Paris, 27 – 27 April 2012

This paper is a draft

Please do not cite

The Youth Discourses on EU-ropeanization in the New European Countries and the Margins of Europe[i]

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Abstract

In the following paper I discuss the perception of EU-ropeanization among the youth from the new European countries (the cases of Romania and Poland) and the margins of Europe (the case of Georgia). Based on my recent cross-cultural qualitative research, namely, the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with Georgian, Romanian and Polish youth, I aim to illustrate how the EU-ropeanization discourses uphold the ambivalent identities promoting the construction of certain reality, in which the young people constantly negotiate between the EU-ropeanizing forces and the national. The abovementioned ambivalence is reflected in the youth narratives on the impact of the EU normative standards on their societies that tend to both regulate and confuse everyday life and of the EU-ropeanizing trends on the local traditions that tend to both encourage inventing "specificity"and endanger traditional practices.

The positive outcomes of the EU integration as seen by the youth from the new European countries are both the ease of crossing the borders with new opportunities to study and work and the EU projects supporting the development of local economies and infrastructure. However, they stress that both the former and the latter have their side effects as the implementation of certain EU regulations might represent a mere performance/spectacle, while crossing the borders might produce a nation-wide "failure discourse" as a result of negative stigmatization by a recipient society. The discourses of the youth from the margins of Europe being willing to join the EU (Georgia) do resonate with the ones of their counterparts from the new European countries (Romania and Poland).

Keywords: EU-ropeanization, youth, discourse, stigmatization, ambivalent identities.

Introduction

In the following paper I attempt to contribute to highlighting the issue of the controversial processes of integration and division, of blurring and consolidating borders, and of growing sameness and lasting difference. I attempt to illustrate how this duality provokes a new politics of ambivalencein the Eastern European countries and the margins of Europe, both promoting the EU-ropeanization process and encouraging itsperception in the light of endangering local practices.

It is a widespread assumption thatborders are becoming fuzzy and that never was the shifting of places as easy as nowadays. Usually scholars bring the example of the European Union (EU) as a relevant case. Despite this fact, the discourse on "Fortress Europe" has gained a new incite today. How is it possible that in the conditions of the ongoing EU enlargement the frontiers of Europe are constantly consolidated? How is it possible that the countries that have managed to return to their "Mother" Europe after the collapse of the communist regime need to constantly prove their Europeanness, while those remaining on the margins of Europe desperately try to persuade the European "Core" that despite their peripheral position, they belong to Europe because of their historical, religious, cultural heritage, etc. The cases of Romania and Poland, on the one hand, and Georgia, on the other hand, represent wonderful examples of attempting to prove one's Europeanness both when it should not be questionable any more (as Poland and Romania are the EU member countries) and when it is still questionable (as Georgia is not a part of the EU).

I got especially interested in the youth discourses about the integration with the European "Core" and their attitudes to EU-ropeanization in the light of the EU membership/non-membership. For this purpose, I have conducted a qualitative social research (June 2010-December 2011), namely, in-depth interviews and focus groups with the youth aged 17-25 in Georgia, Romania and Poland. I have conducted 50 in-depth interviews and 2 focus groups with the young people in the capital of Georgia – Tbilisi, 33 in-depth interviews and 5 focus groups with the young people in the capital of Romania - Bucharest and one of the main cities of Transylvania - Cluj-Napoca, and 14 in-depth interviews and 3 focus groups in Krakow as the old capital and one of the most international cities in Poland. The collected data were transcribed and submitted to the qualitative content- and discourse analyses.

In what follows Idescribea small part of the findings of my cross-cultural research. Based on the youth perceptions, I aim to illustrate how the EU-ropeanization discourses uphold the ambivalent identities promoting the construction of certain reality, in which the young people constantly negotiate between the EU-ropeanizing forces and the national.

On the EU Regulations

Thus, what are the young people's discourses on EU-ropeanization in the new European countries (Poland and Romania)and the margins of Europe (Georgia)?

One would assume that because of the long-lasting desire to be integrated in the EU that was finally fulfilled a few years ago and because of the fresh curiosity related to the recent membership, EU-ropeanization would most likely be perceived by the new European countries as a largely positive phenomenon. One can even bring the evidence from the discourses of local intellectuals arguing "that 'Europe' [implying the EU] brings 'tolerance' and 'rationality' into our not truly 'European' country" (Melegh 2006, 114) or from those of local politicians perceiving their local "as past and 'old' and the 'European' as 'future' and 'new'" (Krzyzanowski 2009, 107).One can further support the presentedevidence by the statistical data demonstrating that the New Europeans, especially Romanians' and Poles' attitudes toward the EU are much more optimistic than those of other EU members, exemplified by the fact that the approval rate of the EU documents, as well as the population's belief in the EU, is the highest in these two countries among the EU member states.[ii] However, the reality is not as simple as that and the youth discourses reveal that there is a dual attitude toward the EU influences in the newly acquired EU countries: On the one hand, the young people acknowledge certain positive aspects of Europeanization; while on the other hand, the very same young people, in the very same narratives, express their discontent about those aspects that do not fit the local traditions and lifestyle, and are perceived as alien and artificially imposed over them; consequently, they openly criticize the EU for being "blind" to the local realities.

What aspects are considered as the positive outcomes of EU-ropeanization? Both Romanian and Polish youth state that the most obvious positive impact is that the borders have been opened and now they can freely travel to the Western part of Europe both to study and to work. They also emphasize that the EU membership has provided their countries with new opportunities to develop economy and infrastructure as the EU supports the implementation of certain projects in this direction. However, they stress that both the former and the latter have their own side effects that cause lots of confusion.

One of the examples can be cited from the interview with 21-year-old Adriana, who talks about the EU projects being implemented in Romania:

> "Definitely, there are some changes. I am thinking of some projects that are supported by and implemented with the EU money as the EU is supposed to help us develop or whatever good intentions it has☺; but there are always lots

of stories around them as quite often these projects turn out to be a complete failure and the EU doesn't really care about how they are implemented! For example, the case when they organized computer classes for disabled people with the idea that it would help them in the future employment. The problem is that their backgrounds have no relation with a computer; they actually don't need a computer. They have only learned how to turn a computer on and off and how to use the Word but they still cannot use it for employment. And there are still the debates on whether they need these classes at all, meanwhile lots of money being spent on it and no one really interested to go and discuss this issue with these people themselves."

Thus, in this narrative the EU's "good intentions" are considered as futile being perceived as a mere declaration of the EU's missionary function to "help [others] develop", while not "caring about" the actual outcomes. This effort is perceived as "a complete failure"as, according to the respondent, the EU is not interested in what those, who are supposed to get its support, actually think of it.

Another example of the EU's project to civilize, as well as to make the locals more humanistic, is presented in 24-year-old Elena's narrative. She brings a case of her village, located close to Bucharest, where they

"...always killed a pig with a knife and could eat it whenever they wanted so. Now there is a new EU regulation that they should kill a pig using an injection and necessarily under a vet's supervision. The idea is that it is more humanistic but the people respond to it with suspicion thinking they are controlled as a few years ago the vet had to go from a house to a house to check how many pigs and cows each person had. Well, the villagers still practice the knife method though they cannot openly do it. Probably they think: 'that's how we have been always doing' but they also consider the new method as a waste of time (you need to wait for a vet) and money (you need to buy an injection), which doesn't really make the society more humanistic!"

Thus, the implementation of the EU regulation is again perceived as a mere performance of being humanistic that cannot really increase the level of humanism in the society. But what it actually does is raising the population's anger for being controlled and causing their dissatisfaction with being restricted to do things in a traditional way. However, the young people are well aware of the EU's "strong bargaining position" (Schwellnus 2005, 52) and realize that, to quote Elena's words again, "it is useless to complain: Why should they tell us how to eat our meat? It is like: Why should those, who invest, tell us what to do?"

One more issue seen by the youth as an outcome of the EU regulations is that they might provoke more confrontations and conflicts among the neighbors than it happened before. One of the examples suggested by my

respondent is the case of vodka "Polinka" and the debate on which country is authorized to produce it. 23-year-old Alexandra explained it as follows:

> "Now it's all about the question of standardization and who will own the 'Polinka' patent and who is better than whom... Now Hungarians have got the patent and only they can call it 'Polinka', while we [Romanians] and Poles also have it. This evil at some point creates more conflicts than it was before and instead of adapting to the EU, the EU is forcefully assimilating us, which is a big [*in a prolonged manner*] mistake because we are so happy thinking the EU is coming and helping, the international monetary fund is giving money and we'll get our salaries next month and so on, but there are many other problems the EU would have never thought of. And we didn't envisage them because we had no idea; we just wanted to be in!"

According to this narrative, the EU regulations or the so called standardization may provoke a conflict and even an ethnic rivalry ("who is better than whom") among the neighboring countries, instead of solving them. Furthermore, the respondent states that the EU strategy implies not the "adaptation" but "forceful assimilation," which, she thinks, goes against the people's expectations and ruins their trust in the EU. The whole narrative is constructed based on the dual representations: One the one hand, "we are so happy" and believe in the future and the economic prosperity the EU is bringing, while on the other hand, the EU is escalating the conflicts among neighbors, it is "forcefully assimilating us," and if only we had known... The question is: If only you had known, would you have been against joining the EU? I am pretty confident that the very same young people would say that they would still have been eager to join the EU and that they are still eager to be its members!

On Migration to the "Old" European Countries

Besides discussing the twofold character of the EU regulations, the young people have reflected on the ambiguity caused by crossing the borders: All the respondents recognize that after joining the EU it is much easier to go abroad to both study and work, and it is a common fact that Eastern Europeans migrate to Western Europe. The descriptions of their experiences of staying abroad are amazingly similar and while listening to their stories one can experience a constant déjà vu. The Polish youth regretfully admit that "people don't have a good opinion about" them in Britain and Germany (those European countries to which Poles most often migrate), while the Romanian youth disclose that they have "a bad name" in Italy, Spain and France (the countries to which Romanians usually migrate). Thus, the ease of crossing the borders can be considered as both a success (new opportunities to study and work) and a failure (negative stigmatization

by a recipient society). It is remarkable that the "failure discourse" related to migration is missing only in two interviews conducted in Romania and one interview conducted in Poland.

The following two examples represent the Romanian and Polish youths' narratives related to their trips abroad:

"When I am in Germany, I try to speak German so that people think I live here for a long time and I am a part of their country, because I have a family there and my cousin told me: When you speak Polish here, they think you are stupid, they want to go away from you, etc. Some people abroad are ashamed of our country☹" (Agnieszka, aged 20).

What struck me in this narrative was a sudden shift from the first to the third person! My respondent did not conceal that she avoided revealing her nationality in Germany though was ashamed to openly admit that she was among those, who were ashamed of their own country. Probably national sentiments are quite strong even when individuals are ashamed of their nationality.

"Many Romanians are ashamed of their national identity because of their compatriots' behaviors abroad. This is what happened to us in Italy: We were the Erasmus program students and were going to organize a Romanian party, four of us. But suddenly there was that episode of the Romanian or Gipsy [*pausing here and emphasizing that either could be*] crime against an Italian woman and we were in panic. We immediately started speaking English instead of Romanian because our parents would call us and say: 'Don't speak Romanian - otherwise some angry Italians might be around, understand you speak Romanian and revenge!' It was the first time we experienced a racist issue... There was a sudden hope when a Pope appeared on the balcony in Vatican and preached about tolerance. You feel a kind of relief but then you hear some people were beaten in a supermarket just because they were Romanians☹. As the Erasmus program students we were supposed to exchange the values and be proud of it, and the weekend we spent was really scary!" (Alina,aged 24).

Here, again, my interviewee does not say anything about her being ashamed of her nationality; rather it is the story of being scared of an offensive treatment by others. However, returning to the very first sentence in this paragraph and realizing that the rest of the paragraph is the evidence for the first sentence, which actually represents the main argument, it becomes clear that the whole story was meant as an example of "Romanians [being] ashamed of their national identity" because of what their fellow Romanians or maybe even Gipsies (often perceived as the ones who spoil the name of Romanians) do abroad.

Alongside sharing their stories of staying in the Western European countries, the young people also share their strategies of avoiding stigmatization. Polish respondentsdisclose with a sad smile or an ironic tone how they desperately try to adopt the British accent after a few months' stay in Britain; moreover, how they try to even speak Polish with a British accent! Romanians confess with the same sad smile or the same ironic tone that while staying abroad they try to hide their nationality; moreover, that sometimes they even pretend to be Italians!

In this context the case of Georgia, located on the margins of Europe outside the borders of the EU, provokes a special interest. Although Georgia is not a part of the EU, the desire to join it is very strong and the official political discourses always emphasize the country's foreign policy priority to join the EU and the NATO. The recent nation-wide surveys illustrate that more than 80% of the population supports Georgia's integration into the EU. Moreover, 51% of the population expresses partial or full trust in the EU, which is higher than the one in the courts (29%), media (32%), the parliament (34%) and the government (34%).[iii] However, again, the reality is not as simple as that and the in-depth interviews with Georgian youth reveal that despite being positive about the EU integration, Georgian young people are nevertheless concerned about its side effects thinking that

"all the changes have their positive and negative sides. Joining the EU will probably be beneficial in the economic terms as it might bring more investments; however, I am afraid, we will have to adjust to lots of different regulations that are alien to our country. I guess it will cause lots of objections and at least the inner protest of Georgians, who cannot stand being controlled, especially from the outside, and consider it as a form of subordination harming their self-esteem and pride" (Sandro, aged 20).

Thus, the narrative reveals the fear of Georgian youth that alongside some positive developments in the area of economics, the EU may also impose lots of various regulations that do not really fit the local reality, therefore, being perceived by the locals as an intrusion harming their national sentiments and causing "at least [their] inner protest."

But what is even more harming to the Georgians' "hyperbolic pride" (Kiossev 2002, 183) is the discourses on "our compatriots' shameful behavior abroad." One of the vivid examples is represented by the famous case of the Stradivarius violin theft in Austria. The most shameful part of this story as perceived by Georgians was the fact that a Georgian male, who stole the violin, had no idea what he had stolen, and the whole rumor in Georgia was around the issue of the world getting to know how "backward" Georgians are. Even the thief's short interview illustrates that he regretted not the fact of stealing itself but the fact that he did not know he had stolen a Stradivarius violin. And the young people ironically noted that Georgia

would never become a part of the EU as after this case everyone would fear that all the Stradivarius violins would disappear in Europe. It is a good example of how a particular case perceived in the light of spoiling the name of a country can produce a nation-wide "failure discourse."

Conclusion

Reflecting on the presented narratives, one gets an impression they are so similar that if not mentioning particular locations in the text, they could be ascribed to the youth of any of the abovementioned country. The debates on the EU regulations that are considered as incompatible to the local life style, as well as the migration issues perceived as resulting in stigmatization, cause similar responses of the youth from all three countries. Despite the fact that they think that certain EU-ropeanizing trends might encourage cultural bricolage and support the invention of "specificity" (Ditchev 2002, 247), they are still persuaded that many of them might endanger local traditionsbecause of being merely adopted and not adapted to the local reality.In this context the young people often emphasize the EU's "strong bargaining position" and its "power to impose its ideology or punish those resisting it" (Andrei, aged 25). This punishment can be represented bythe sanctions of different severity for the already acquired EU members or by a warning for the countries hoping to ever be incorporated in the EU structures that their integration will be postponed to the even more indefinite future. Furthermore, I would say that the following quote by a Georgian respondent representing his perception of EU-ropeanization accurately describes the youth attitudes from other two countries as well:

> "What is good about joining the EU is that you won't need to go through all those stages of visa application, which is really humiliating! But I see another danger here: Although I am not very proud of us and our deeds abroad, I still think that it is so easy for the powerful countries to find a scapegoat and it is so difficult for the powerless ones to prove their truth..." (Giorgi,aged 21).

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[i]The research has been supported by New Europe College, Institute for Advanced Study (Bucharest, Romania)sponsored by the VolkswagenStiftung.
[ii]Eurobarometers: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_arch_en.htm
[iii]Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2011.

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