

## EUROPEAN IDENTITY, MEDIA AND OTHERNESS: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS FROM A FRAMING PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** *After more than 50 years since the beginning of the European unification project, the development of a genuine European identity is still questionable. Due to the difficulties in defining and sharing a common European identity, some views claim that this concept is strictly utopian, as it cannot be operationalized, while others sustain the idea that an increasing number of citizens identify with Europe under specific circumstances. Given the literature dedicated to European identity as a product of people's frames regarding Europe, the paper aims at analyzing how this identity is framed today by the citizens of the EU. Secondly, it aims at exploring how certain media frame European issues and how these frames can influence the construction of a European sense of belonging. In order to meet these objectives, the present study uses qualitative analysis and is based on the fact that although the media's power in reshaping certain identities is highly debated, it is rarely demonstrated empirically.*

**Keywords:** *European identity, citizens' identity frames, news frames, otherness.*

### 1. FRAMES OF A EUROPEAN IDENTITY

The issue of "European identity" has become, in the recent years, a constant source of inquiry and research for different academic disciplines. Despite the growing interest manifested by scholars in this field, the identity of Europe remains uncertain and imprecise. Today, the literature reveals various trends regarding the existence of the European identity: some scholars argue that the concept denominates a well established presence, a continuous process, its existence being proven and supported by different phenomena such as migration or media coverage of the European issues (Trandafoiu, 2006: 91); others remain more reserved and say that a sense of European identity had begun to develop and increasing numbers of Europeans identify in

one way or another with Europe (Baycroft, 2004; Brutter, 2005:150-165; Risse, 2010). However, some academics agree that European identity is just a theoretical concept, a form lacking content, "an illusion, at best" (Ferencová, 2006).

At the same time, the latest writings discuss European identities in the plural (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009). Without being rivals, as usually thought, they complement each other successfully. Moreover, as studies have often revealed, people display "multiple identities" (Smith, 1992; 1993; Arts & Halman, 2006; Dufek, 2009; Fligstein, Polyakova, & Sandholtz, 2012). That means Europeans can be members of both, their nation, and the wider EU. Put differently, "identities do not wax or wane at each other's expense" (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009: 9-10); they are "fluid" and "flexible" (Smith, 1993), "contextual" and "situational" (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Brutter, 2004), and dependent on the roles that individuals play. Identity, thus, cannot be seen as a static entity, but as a process of constant change and

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negotiation with the people around us (Jenkins, 2000: 12). And European identity, one of the many layers of one's social identity could be approached in the same terms.

European identity is, doubtless, a multidimensional concept, covering very different aspects. However, for the purpose of this paper, it will be understood as a perception of *self* in relation to the *others*. The literature dedicated to exploring the construction of identity by defining alterity underlies the fact that identity can be viewed as a process of classification and self-categorization, involving boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Turner et al., 1987; Bruter, 2005: 8). Put differently, *we* know who we are because *others* show us what we are not; comparing *us* to *them* gives us the possibility to "recognize ourselves as different" (Shore, 1993: 782).

From this particular point of view, European identity is defined by some scholars as a relational process, shaped both by the interaction with national identity and with significant *others* (Triandaffilyidou, 2008: 280). The debates on who Europe's others were have a long history in the literature and findings won't be discussed here. However, Timothy Baycroft captures very well the core of the research by saying that Europe's *others* "represented an entire range of degrees or types of difference according to the circumstances" (2004: 157). Russia, Turkey, Islam or the USA were perceived, for centuries, as strong European identity builders (Morozov & Rumelili, 2012)

Another important aspect in the contemporary debate on European identity is the extent to which it can be measured and experienced in everyday contexts. Among the factors that have the ability to foster and construct a sense of Europeaness, researchers point to European institutions, everyday social practices, political actions and common media discourses (Gripsrud, 2007; Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009). This particular approach concerning the role of common media discourses in shaping the European identity will be the highlight of this paper.

Also, the recent research dedicated to measuring European identity defines it as a product of people's personal perceptions of and experiences with Europe, a product marked by their frames regarding it (Brutter, 2004). In the light of this research, identity is defined through context, emphasizing the goals that determine a certain identification, and through the frames it generates. According to this conception frames influence a certain sense of identity in the same way that identity determines the formation of frames. From this particular perspective the attitudes toward Europe and the EU are seen as at least partially determined by identity's role in mixing different frames of thinking (Van der Veen, 2010).

By using focus-groups for analyzing European identity and the sense of membership to a European community, Brutter (2004) revealed significant variations from one country to another. For example, while the citizens of Luxembourg tended to associate the EU with values of peace and cooperation, Romanians had a tendency towards associating it with economic prosperity and democratic values, and less with a stronger political power in the world. Nonetheless, in most cases, one of the main definitions of Europe was that of "dissolution of physical and symbolic boundaries for citizens" (Brutter, 2004: 30). Brutter's research also showed that individuals feel European in certain contexts, such as traveling freely in Europe, and civil institutions such as mass media can influence the emergence of a European identity. Consequently, European identity could be interpreted as one of the multiple identities that citizens of Europe possess, and may become prominent in specific circumstances (Udrea & Corbu, 2011).

Since media messages have proven to represent a rich source of frames regarding the world they present (Iyengar & Kinder, 1982), we should look deeper into how media frames, and especially news frames, can create a sense of a common European identity by confronting "us" to "them". Although some authors have revealed the fundamental role that common

media discourses might have in the construction of a European identity (Gripsrud, 2007; Schneeberger, 2009), few research has been conducted in order to test empirically these hypotheses.

In order to explore the possible influence of news frames on forging a common identity, it is necessary to understand the process of framing in its components. This process consists of *frame building* (creating certain patterns of interpretation to understand the facts that surround us), and *frame setting* (the interplay between media frames and audience predispositions) (Scheufele, 1999; de Vreese, 2002; 2005). Although definitions and measurements of this concept vary considerably in the literature (de Vreese, 2005 *apud* Capella; Jamieson, 1997), a common view on frames defines them as patterns of cognition and interpretation generated by emphasizing certain aspects of reality and hiding or minimizing others (Entman, 2003). That is why, in the context of our research, frames were understood as frequently expressed attributes about an issue or a social actor.

The important role of news frames in shaping perceptions of everyday realities, and in building a certain representation of facts, has been highly outlined by scholars in political communication. Iyengar (1991) provided experimental evidence on how news frames can affect attributions of responsibility. He outlined the existence of two types of news frames: episodic and thematic. While the first depict public issues in terms of concrete instances, the latter emphasize general outcomes, conditions and statistical evidence. As Iyengar's research proved, exposure to episodic formats makes viewers less likely to hold public officials responsible of certain problems. Also, some academics show that framing effects are not limited to changing certain opinions; they also imply adding new beliefs (Shah, Kwak, Schmierbach & Zubric, 2004; Slothuus, 2008, Lecheler & de Vreese, 2009). Given the essential role of news frames in shaping certain perceptions, it will represent one of the aims of this paper.

## 2. QUESTIONS, INSTRUMENTS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The empirical research addressed to young educated people from Romania, aged between 18 and 33. 18 individuals participated in this study and were organized into 3 groups, according to their age (18-22; 23-29; 29-33). The choice of this category of people was motivated by findings in the current literature relating to the assuming of a European identity. Following recent studies (Bruter, 2005; Arts & Halman, 2006; Fligstein, 2009) we may affirm that in contemporary Europe, the young, educated people, speaking foreign languages, having higher incomes and the opportunity to travel and interact with fellows across borders tend to identify with a "broader geographical unit" and to perceive themselves as Europeans.

The study was guided by the following research questions: *What are the frames that young Romanian citizens associate with Europe and European identity? To what extent do they assume a European identity through the lens of these frames? How can media news frames affect young Romanians' patterns of thinking regarding Europe and European identity? To what extent the Other's presence in the news frames creates the prerequisites for a common European identity?*

In order to answer these questions, we used peer group discussions. As variations of focus-groups, peer groups were firstly used by Gamson (1992), and considered to reflect respondents' perceptions and inter-subjectivity, forcing the creation of common frames of reference. They are based on the fact that the formation of a public opinion implies a dialogical process among social actors, a constant negotiation of meaning between people and their close ones (de Vreese, 2003). That is why peer groups are usually centered on the frames emerging as a result of the interaction between individuals, their close ones and others. Furthermore, considering that this method can reduce participants' discomfort in expressing their opinions by enabling them to bring friends along, we have found it very appropriate for our research.

In order to capture participants' frames regarding Europe, we asked them to indicate the first thing that came to their mind when hearing this word. Respondents' spontaneous associations were grouped in clusters of meaning that allowed us to identify their frames regarding Europe. They were asked then to define the ideal image of the European, which helped us explore their frames concerning European identity. This also gave us the opportunity to examine to what extent respondents assumed such an identity.

After expressing their opinions about Europe, participants were asked to read a news article regarding an informal meeting between Barack Obama and the representatives of the EU. We wanted to learn, in this way, to what extent one of its main frames was to be absorbed by participants in the study. The meeting reported in the article was referred to as being centered on finding solutions for the financial crisis in Ireland and on laying to rest the concerns related to its spread in Europe. We identified one of the main frames as being *EU spooned by the USA* and tried to find out to what extent this could alter respondents' frames regarding the EU and the European identity.

Thus, respondents were told to formulate their opinions about Europe and the USA after reading it, and to explain if they would like to be a part of Europe as it was described in the article. Their viewpoints were structured in clusters of meaning reflecting respondents' frames as a result of interacting with this type of media discourse.

One of the limits of our research is that we do not know the degree of salience of this article's frame in other Romanian media. Thus, it might not be illustrative for the dominant news frames of the EU. However, we accounted for the high visibility of the website that hosted this article, *ziare.com*, that could favor numerous views. According to the *Study of Audiences and Traffic on Internet* (electronic source) introduced by the Romanian Audit Bureau of Circulations, this website is among the top ten most viewed general journals in Romania. Another reason that determined the choice of this article is that it refers to an issue that is highly debated in

everyday discussions in Romania - the financial crisis. Moreover, it presents the official position of the USA (which we qualified as Europe's *Other*) with respect to overcoming it.

Although this research is limited by the previously mentioned aspects and by the relatively reduced number of peer-groups conducted, it highlights the way in which everyday news frames can reframe individuals' perceptions regarding the European Union and the European identity.

### 3. FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

***The 18 – 22 years group.*** In order to find out how respondents frame European identity, we firstly explored what Europe means to them. It is necessary to mention that most participants in this group equaled Europe with the EU, in the sense that when asked about Europe, they referred to the EU. Their spontaneous associations with Europe included frames like: *EU as an artificial construct*, *EU as an opportunity*, and *EU as a counter-power for the USA*.

The first frame portrayed the EU as being nothing more than „an artificial unity between cultures that have no intension to unite”, “a union of interests”. The European official motto is uncredited by most of the people involved in discussion, because it implies cultural uniformity, which, in their view, remains unrealistic for the moment. The second frame presented the EU through the advantages it offers to its citizens, among which the freedom of movement, the possibility to work abroad and to access European funds were the most frequently mentioned (“I can travel without a visa”, “You can get a job anywhere”). By means of traveling, Romanians have the chance to promote their national specific, to improve their living standards by reference to other economic landmarks, to change their mentalities or to bring back home technological innovations. The third frame revealed the EU as a political structure, an economic power created to counter-balance the USA, but unable to live up to the American political construct, seen as a superstate.

Somebody argued that the success of the USA as a political construct is also determined by the fact that each culture is free to preserve its specificity; Americans respect differences and diversity and never try to level their cultures.

Part of the spontaneous associations above revealed an ideal image of the European, enriched with new elements as the discussion advanced. Therefore, the ideal citizen of the EU belongs to a well-developed state (similar to the USA), and is not forced to perform poorly paid jobs; he possesses a certain standard of civilization and can travel freely around Europe, getting to know other cultures in this way (“We need to be familiar with the cultures of other countries”); he is a Christian and is part of a European construction guided by moral values, by rigor and formalities. As it appears, respondents framed Europe as *moral*. They also stressed that the European is not from other continents such as Africa, which determines the emergence of the frame *EU in opposition to the others*. Thus, Europeans are also defined by what they are not.

Despite the ideal projections regarding European identity, some opinions claimed that this concept is abstract and artificially made up to symbolize the idea of unity, which is not plausible in the near future. European identity is related, in respondents’ views, to the existence of a EU developed not only economically and politically, but also culturally. So, as long as the EU fails to reach the development of a normal state on certain levels, the idea of a European identity remains utopian, more appropriate for the literature than for everyday realities.

Another important aspect: participants in this group are aware of the gap between their ideal projections regarding European identity and real life experiences that often contradict them. The EU is not a moral value-centered union, but a union of economic and political interests, where small, poor countries have no power of decision at the political level and have to comply with measures imposed by the strong and powerful. Mobility, on the other hand, can be seen as an opportunity, as a great chance to travel freely and interact with different people and cultures; but it can be equally understood as disadvantage, because it

fosters the migration of professional elites rather than that of ordinary citizens. These ideas promote a new frame – the *contrasting Europe*, which reflects that Romania’s access to the EU brought with it both benefits and costs.

As for the degree of assuming a European identity, findings showed that most respondents consider themselves Europeans simply by convention – they belong to the European continent and, since 2007, they are members of the EU; but they do not feel that they share common values, symbols or traditions with other Europeans. Thus their national identification takes priority (“We are Europeans in the same way that we are citizens of the world. We live in Europe”). Isolated, it was noticed that certain contexts favored the assuming of a European identity. These contexts referred to the possibility of traveling freely within the borders of the EU, which is believed to be enjoyed especially by Romanians whom experienced a restrictive past from this point of view.

Additionally, one of the main purposes of the present paper was to capture whether the news frames reflecting the presence of the *Other* generate in our respondents the assuming of a European identity. After reading the news article, most of them identified the dominant frame of the story, that of the EU accepting advice from the USA in order to overcome the financial crisis (*rescued EU*). As discussions on the article’s message developed, respondents portrayed Europe in terms of vulnerability and insecurity (“USA helps EU to overcome the crisis in Ireland”, “EU is insecure, it needs assistance and help”). On the other hand, the USA, represented by Barack Obama, was seen as the “powerful”, “interventionist”, “omnipresent” actor, “able to offer help in solving certain financial crises”; but also selfish, centered on its own goals (“USA involvement in European affairs is driven by selfish purposes; Europe crisis affects the economy of the USA”). Thus, the frames resulting from the ideas above can be portrayed as *vulnerable EU* and *powerful USA*. This positive representation of the *Other* reflected a less appealing image of the EU and

a reduced attachment to the European community.

**The 23-28 years group.** Similar to the youngest group, when asked about the first thing that came to their mind regarding Europe, respondents in this group referred to the EU. Their spontaneous associations with Europe reflected the following frames: *EU as an opportunity*, *EU as a common economic and political structure* and *EU as opposed to the Other*.

The first frame included advantages such as the freedom of travel, enjoyed especially by Romanian citizens, given the country's communist past (“[...] Traveling was only a dream before 1989 [...]”), and attributes associated with the EU, like conservatism, precision, power, diversity. Europe's political, economic and cultural diversity was expressed by comparative reference to well-developed Western countries and Eastern ex-communist countries. The second frame presented the EU as a union of states with a common speech, currency and defense force, a space defined by the leveling of national cultures and languages, a „global village”, as one person mentioned. As for the EU understood as opposed to the *Other* many participants in this group defined it as implying a certain liberty of expression, in contrast with Arabian countries, and as being a political and economical counter-power for the USA.

These spontaneously expressed frames created the outlines for an ideal image of the EU and the Europeans. This image includes equality of rights (understood as lack of discrimination), freedom of choice (“You have the right to choose what you want to do”), adaptability, the opportunity and willingness to study abroad and to interact with various cultures (“The European is open to new experiences and cultures [...]”). This ideal image also reflects civic involvement for a better society, understood as promoting a certain moral conduct – respecting the law; it reflects the belonging to a well-developed state, and equally the development of Romanian standards of life as a result of observing different lifestyles from other countries in the EU. In addition, EU as a whole should be a moral value-centered

structure that goes beyond economic and political interests. Besides the opportunity frame mentioned before, another frame is that of *moral Europe*, which values selfless solidarity and equality of rights.

Moreover, most individuals in this group claimed that being European implies being recognized and treated as such, pointing to the equality of rights and obligations. Despite all these ideal projections regarding the European identity, two respondents argued that this concept is rather artificial, as it is content lacking (“How should we be? Should we be like the English, or the French? What makes them European, anyway?”). Respondents also argued that European identity originates from institutional contexts, being adequate only in certain circumstances.

Beside the opportunity and the moral frame, there have been identified the contours of a negative perspective upon Europe, seen through the lens of the following frames: *economic-centered EU*, *discriminating EU* and *contrasting EU*. The first frame referred to Europe as a structure guided only by economic goals and not by common values among the members states. The second frame pointed to Romania's negative image in Europe proliferated by the law-breaking actions of the Roma people, by the illegal workers and immigrants who work abroad, and also by the fact that Romanians accept low waged jobs compared to the inhabitants of the host countries. The vision of contrasting Europe reflects respondents' reference to the ideal image of EU and the fact that real life experiences contradict it. That is, although Romania's accession to the EU has brought several advantages, respondents claim that the political and economical costs implied are important. They referred to the internationalization of the Romanian industry (selling oil refineries and electricity enterprises) and to the profits the country is deprived from as a result of this process. Likewise, some participants emphasized that while accessing European funds is viewed as an advantage of the integration process, it generates a certain political control over our country by the EU. Furthermore, despite the fact that the accession to the EU brought the

opportunity of higher incomes and a better life for the people who leave Romania, it also implies the migration of Romanian professional elites; this is perceived as a blind spot in the Romanian collective consciousness (“We go for the miracle of the West [...] valuable people go away”).

As the discussion evolved, we discovered that some of the frames previously explored also reflected respondents’ identification with Europe. In this sense, half of them said they do not feel European, given the *discriminating EU frame*. The other half affirmed that there are certain contexts that can help generating the assuming of a European identity, such as: traveling freely within the borders of the EU, living in countries that do not discriminate Romanian citizens or the contexts in which Romanians are recognized as Europeans by other citizens of the EU. Also, working in international environments (academic institutions or foreign internships) has been pointed as a context that privileges the sense of belonging to a European identity, because in these environments Romanians are appreciated for their work and qualification. Thus, for some of our respondents, the assuming of a European sense of belonging is strongly influenced by the *EU as an opportunity* frame. Despite these projections, an important finding here is that all the members of this group experienced a reduced assuming of a European identity, partially because they took it for granted. As one of them said, “We are Europeans as we are members of the EU”.

Then, considering that another main goal of the paper was to find out if news frames referring to the *Other* can influence the forging of a European identity, we tried to explore to what extent participants in this group identify and assume the main frame of the news article presented. After reading it, respondents identified its dominant frame - Europe being helped by the USA in overcoming the financial crisis (*rescued EU*). Subsequently, they underlined a relationship of inequality between the two actors, with the EU seen as “vulnerable”, and “weak” and the USA perceived as “arrogant”, “powerful”, and “not interested in Europe’s real issues, but focused on its own goals”. In this context, Obama’s

presence to the reunion with the EU’s representatives was considered by most of the respondents as guided only by self-centered, economic interests (the financial crisis in Europe could affect the USA).

Although participants in this group mentioned that the article stressed the USA’s attempt to help the EU in overcoming the financial crisis, they also expressed their distrust regarding this. The dominant opinion was that the USA only meant to evaluate the spread of the financial crisis in Europe and to give reassurances of their support, but not necessarily to offer practical solutions to eliminate it. As it seems, not only did respondents identify the main frame of the news article, but they also emphasized a strong power gap between the two political actors. The *vulnerable Europe* and *powerful USA* frames generated the idea that Europeans are “mere puppets in the hands of the powerful”. Thus, we can argue that this representation of the *Other* determined an undesirable image of the EU and the European citizens, fairly distant from the one initially described. Perhaps creating a positive outlook of Europe and a rather negative perspective on the USA, could have made respondents more willing to consider themselves as Europeans. Naturally, this assumption requires further research in order to be affirmed.

**The 29-33 years group.** Within this group, the spontaneous associations with Europe revealed the following main frames: *former powerful Europe* versus *present powerless EU* and *Europe as a specific cultural entity*. Respondents emphasized particularly the difference between Europe and the EU, defining the latter as a mere travesty of the first, in terms of political power. *Former powerful Europe*, a frequently outlined frame in this group, outlined the past of Europe as a source of powerful empires and of great antique civilizations. As opposed to this image, contemporary Europe, assimilated as the EU, was perceived as a structure “without a strong say in the world”, as a medium power compared to states such as the USA and Russia.

Relating to Europe as a specific cultural entity, respondents affirmed that its main

features can be defined by Christianity, white race, multiculturalism, and beautiful capitals. The last two traits were seen as highly admired by Americans. As it seems, all of these images of Europe were built in reference to the *Other* which, in our view, demonstrates the importance of alterity in shaping a certain identity.

Although respondents' initial associations with Europe did not focus on the EU, all of their further projections regarding the image of Europe and the European identity pointed to it particularly. In this context, respondents highlighted two main frames: *EU as an opportunity* and *EU as an artificial construct*. The first one referred to the possibility of traveling freely inside the borders of the EU, to the human rights that citizens from communist states didn't have before, and to the advantages of a well-established education system. Other opportunities included the possibility to work abroad, the European health card, the chance to address to a higher judicial institution and the lack of certain automobile taxes for the citizens of the member states.

Regarding the *EU as an artificial construct*, it alluded to participants' belief that this structure was created as a counter-power to the USA and Russia, and was intended to balance political forces and not to unify people with common needs and interests. Similar to the spontaneous associations fore mentioned, these frames were created in reference to the *Other*, highlighting another proof of its prominence in forging the image of the EU. Equally, the EU's ideal portrait was outlined by most respondents as a well-defined political organism, a federation marked by economical prosperity and flexibility, like the USA. Subsequently, by reference to the USA, these elements helped generating a desirable image of the European, pointing to the following characteristics: rigor, conservatism, tolerance, equality of treatment and rights, ethical principles. Moreover, being European involves being recognized as such and having a common historical background with other citizens of the EU; in this respect, some respondents placed to the fore the necessity of an educational system in which a common

history of the EU to be taught ("We do not have the possibility of learning in school a history of the European community").

After defining these ideal images, participants expressed the extent to which they assume a European identity. Hence, the group revealed three different views: some individuals claimed that they feel European in the light of the opportunities fore mentioned, while others affirmed that there is no need to identity with this entity, as it is a given ("We are Europeans either we like it or not"); in addition, two respondents accentuated that European identity is a relatively content-lacking concept, hard to be assimilated and less salient as opposed to national identity.

Despite the fact that respondents also pointed to other disadvantages of EU membership, these were not mentioned as reasons that would hinder the assuming of a European identity. The respective inconveniences pictured the frame of *contrasting EU* and referred to the inequality in terms of employees' remuneration among member states. Likewise, one isolated opinion revealed that although the integration to the EU has brought the possibility to access certain economic funds, this opportunity is shadowed by the poor management of Romanian authorities.

After reading the article, new frames emerged as a result of interacting with this type of media discourse. As in the other two groups, not only did respondents identify this article's main frame, but they also emphasized a strong power gap between the EU and the USA ("The US are acting like Europe's babysitter"). In this respect, the EU was described as "weak" and "with no control over what is happening in Europe", whereas the USA, represented by Obama, were pictured as "powerful", "interventionist", "focused on their own goals". Moreover, most participants in this group argued that the USA were trying to impose certain economic measures to EU representatives in order to save the American companies in Europe ("The Americans believe their system is the one that works and they're trying to impose it to others [...] They were only concerned with their companies, anyway."). Therefore, the frames generated by



the article consist in that of *vulnerable EU* and *powerful USA*. As a result, all participants in this group refused to identify themselves with such an image of the European community.

#### 4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The investigation of the European identity has proven to be a demanding approach, both theoretically and empirically. Despite the numerous debates dedicated to this subject, scholars haven't agreed on a common definition or understanding of this concept. Thus, in the first part of this paper we identified and briefly discussed the most common trends regarding the existence of a European identity. Additionally, the empirical research explored the present forms and meanings of the identity of Europe, and the frames associated with it in Romanian context.

The analysis was split into 3 main parts, corresponding to the 3 group discussions, and was organised to answer the research questions guiding the study. The main findings of the research are synthetised in what follows.

Regarding participants' spontaneous associations with Europe, the study revealed Europe as defined by reference to *alterity* (predominantly represented by the USA). In this sense, the EU was perceived as an economic power created as a counterweight for the USA, but unable to live up to the American political construct. If the first two groups accentuated the frame of *EU as an opportunity*, the last group highlighted Europe's cultural and historic past. Furthermore, all groups used Europe and the EU interchangeably, although the last group didn't associate the two entities spontaneously, but during the discussion. Concerning the ideal image of Europe and the Europeans, certain frames could be identified in all groups: *EU as an opportunity*, *moral EU*, and *EU as a counter-power for the USA*. In this respect, respondents idealized Europe as a well-defined political construct, comparable to the USA, guided by moral principles and intended for its citizens' well being. Despite these ideal projections about EU and the Europeans, many opinions in all group discussions revealed frames such as *contrasting EU*, *EU as an*

*artificial construct*, while the frame of *discriminating Europe* was remarked only in the 23-28 year-old group. These frames indicated a negative perspective upon this economic and political structure.

In conclusion, the people involved in our research perceived EU both positively and negatively, pointing to the great benefits and the important costs implied by Romania's accession to the Union. Also, it seems that the *Other* plays an important part in constructing participants' image of the EU, by providing a constant reference point and by highlighting certain traits of "us" in opposition to "them".

In terms of the assuming of a European identity, we found that respondents tended to take it for granted. Anyway, it is important to mention that the positive images of the EU, mostly expressed through the advantages offered to its citizens, can facilitate Romanians' assuming of a European identity. That is, in specific circumstances, particularly when traveling without restrictions around Europe, the young Romanian people assume a European identity alongside their national identification. This finding was revealed by all peer-group discussions. Likewise, the EU understood in negative terms (*economic-centered EU*, *discriminating EU*) can considerably reduce the sense of belonging to a common European identity.

Concurrently, one of the paper's main goals was to reflect how media news frames can affect young Romanians' patterns of thinking regarding Europe and their common sense of belonging to the European community. Therefore, participants in this study were exposed to a news article presenting the debate concerning the financial crisis in Ireland, between Barack Obama and the EU representatives, at an informal meeting. After reading the article, all respondents strongly emphasized a power gap between EU and the USA, through frames like *vulnerable EU* and *powerful USA*. As a consequence, respondents refused to associate themselves with this "weak" image of the European community. We can consider this new frame of *vulnerable EU* to add to their views on Europe, but further research is needed in order to find out to what extent it is one that remains

in participants' memory. Therefore, one hypothesis that emerges from our research is that only certain representations of the EU and of the *Other* (more powerful EU and a less obvious *Other*) can generate the assuming of a European identity.

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