What does Europe mean to Third country students in the European Union?
An explorative essay analysis

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University of Oldenburg. POLITIS-Working paper No.4/2006
www.uni-oldenburg.de/politis-europe/webpublications
POLITIS – a European research project

Project information

Populations of immigrant origin are growing and changing in Europe. POLITIS explores the potential of immigrants for the development of a civicly active European society, starting with foreign students’ perceptions of Europe and focusing on sustained social and political activities of immigrants. POLITIS is the short title for the research project “Building Europe with New Citizens? An Inquiry into the Civic Participation of Naturalised Citizens and Foreign Residents in 25 Countries”.

The study is divided into 3 parts:

- **Part I:** A comparative literature review on immigrant civic participation in 25 member states
- **Part II:** A comparative analysis of foreign students’ perceptions of Europe, exploring the potential of their ideas about Europe with the help of essays and focus group discussions
- **Part III:** A comparative analysis of more than 150 qualitative interviews with civic activists of immigrant origin in the EU to identify favourable and unfavourable biographical and national conditions for active participation

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Funding Acknowledgement

This research project has been funded by the European Commission in the sixth framework, priority 7, Citizens and governance in a knowledge based society.

www.cordis.lu/citizens

Consortium

Interdisciplinary Centre for Education and Communication in Migration Processes (IBKM) www.uni-oldenburg.de/IBKM

Hellenic Foundation of European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) Athens. www.eliamep.gr

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies. European University Institute (EUI) Florence. www.iue.it/RSCAS

Churches’ Commission of Migrants in Europe (CCME) Brussels. www.cec-kek.org/content/ccme.shtml
Abstract

European integration and cohesion is currently often questioned, with the failure of the constitutional process and declining identification indicators among citizens. In this situation, immigration is usually seen as an additional challenge to European integration as it adds to the already existing cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. In this paper, the opposite stance is taken.

Although immigrants undoubtedly add to diversity in Europe, they may still also promote European cohesion. The paper presents some theoretical arguments to support this view and the results of an explorative analysis of 243 essays written by students and PhD-researchers from all over the world. The essays offer new perspectives on how Third country citizens construct and define Europe and how they can integrate Europeaness into their self-concept.

The overwhelmingly positively connated construction of Europe may be influenced by the sample bias – essays were written as part of applications to a European research project. However, it is interesting to see what they see as positive or negative. While ‘bureaucracy’ is a major negative issue in studies with EU citizens, this issue plays no role at all for non-EU citizens. On the other hand, the EU’s commitment to diversity is highly appreciated in many essays. Results are discussed in relation to relation to EU integration and immigrant integration policies.
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1. Introduction

European integration and cohesion is currently often questioned, with the failure of the constitutional process and declining European identification indicators among citizens. In this situation, immigration is usually seen as an additional challenge to European integration as it adds to the already existing cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.

Jeremy Rifkin gives a concise description of the way this challenge is usually perceived:

Europe is a kaleidoscope of cultural diversity. The Union’s inhabitants break down into a hundred different nationalities who speak eighty-seven different languages and dialects, making the region one of the most culturally diverse areas of the world. (247) … Managing cultural diversity would be tough enough, if it were only a matter of accommodating the often competing agendas of existing European subcultures. The situation is exacerbated by the dramatic increase in immigrant subcultures from outside the European Union. (248) … Europeans find themselves, to some extent, caught between the rock and a hard place. Without a massive influx of immigration over the next decades, Europeans will age and the European project will die. On the other hand, a flood of immigration – and that’s what would be required for the European economy to hold its own on the world stage – threatens to overwhelm already strained government welfare budgets and people’s sense of their own cultural identity. (255) (Rifkin, 2004) [Accentuation in Italics by DV]

Rifkin emphasizes European diversity, but has no problems to speak of challenges to Europeans and their cultural identity later, thus assuming that there is a European cultural identity. Similarly, policy makers often assume that Europe is attractive for immigrants. The German minister of the Interior Wolfgang Schäuble, for example, claimed in an opening address for a European congress that immigration was a joint challenge for Europe, because ‘we, all Europeans jointly, exert an enormous appeal and attractiveness in comparison to other continents and parts of the world’ (Schäuble 2006). This attractiveness is however only seen as a threat and not as a potential asset.

In this paper, I will argue that although immigrants undoubtedly add to diversity in Europe, they may still simultaneously add to European cohesion. If this was true, an affinity to Europe could be used as a resource in immigrant integration processes. This is currently not the case. In the speech of the German minister quoted above, he argues against European regulatory efforts in the field of integration, emphasizing the need to integrate immigrants into ‘local, regional and national structures’ – and not in European structures (Schäuble 2006). In line with this thinking, many national integration programmes emphasize the need to identify with the nation as a necessary prerequisite of successful integration, while neglecting the European dimension. ‘Europe’ is not offered as an identity option. While Rifkin and the German minister use ‘Europeans’ as a taken for granted group, it is not envisaged that immigrants may opt to become primarily part of this group, prior to identifying with any single nation. Thus, immigrants may be forced to ‘de-Europeanize’ to be accepted in the European state they live in. Their potential for European cohesion is currently wasted.

To support the idea that immigrants may add to European cohesion, I will firstly present some theoretical arguments. In the main part, I will present the result of an exploration of essays on the meaning of Europe, written by students and PhD-researchers from all over the world that have applied for participation in a European research project. The essays have specific
features that make them unsuitable for any generalisations about groups, but very suitable for a search for new perspectives. They are collected in a non-random, written by highly educated persons that have an interest in presenting themselves as reflective and original. The empirical part seeks to explore how they construct and define Europe, which positive and negative characteristics they associate with Europe and whether they see it as a (potential) identity dimension.

The paper does not claim to make any empirical statement about Non-EU immigrants or students in general. However, it shows that Non-EU immigrants may present a potential that is worth to be further explored.

2. Theoretical Argumentation

Theoretically, the paper starts from social cognition theory. Individuals construct realities in their minds, using simplifying, discontinuous schemata. These mental structures are developed in communicative interaction with other individuals and in relation to general communication sources like the media so that construction is a social process. The mental structures are used to organize their knowledge about the social world around themes or subjects. Schemata influence the information people notice, think about, and remember, help to reduce ambiguity and to decide (Aronson, Wilson et al., 2004). Schemata of social groups are particularly important for individuals, as the perceived belonging to social groups forms part of their self-concept – their social identity. In social categorisation, value-free characteristics are often associated with values (Mummendey, 1985). Groups may be constructed in relation to many dimensions, such as professional groups, music scenes, ethnic cultures, sports, gender and many more. One dimension of social identity may relate to a group defined in relation to a locality or region, a nation-state or a supranational entity like Europe. Which importance this regional-political dimensions occupies in comparison to other dimensions of group identity may differ from person to person, and for the same person it depends on the situational context. How people define Europe (social categorisation) has an impact on the perceived possibilities to identify as European (social identification).

In his study about the emergence of mass European identities, Bruter (Bruter 2005) is exploring the notion of identity of individual citizens to existing political communities, differentiating between a cultural and civic perspective: The cultural perspective would analyse the sense of belonging with regard to a political group, defined by a certain culture, social similarities, values, religion, ethic or even ethnicity, while the civic identification would explain a sense of belonging with reference to a political structure, a state, set of institutions, rights and rules. He suggests a certain relation between the social categorisation of Europe and the social identification with Europe:

"Indeed, while conceiving Europe as a cultural identity presumably implies a reference to Europe as a continent or civilisation that stretches from the Atlantic to the Ural, conceiving Europe as a civic identity would imply a reference to the European Union, which covers well under half of it. In these particular circumstances, the political entity does not match the cultural entity as yet." (Bruter 2005:13).

It is certainly useful to differentiate between the European Union as a political unit and wider concepts of Europe. However, applying a concept does not necessarily imply the
identification with the constructed concept – social categorisation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for social identification. For the purpose of this study, it is important to note that Third country citizens may have different concepts of Europe, but that they may not identify with them. Having a civic concepts opens up to identification for all people who see themselves as part of the political unit, with a cultural concept, all people who see themselves as part of a European culture may identify, and having a geographical concept opens up for identification for all people who live in geographically defined borders of Europe. In contrast to Bruter, I see no strong link between the geographical and the cultural concept.

I would like to present some reasons why immigrants may have a potential to choose ‘Europe’ as an identity dimension. As Strath (Strath 2002) argues, immigration is a situation in which geographical identities are questioned. While for example unemployed persons or people who change their profession are likely to reflect about their professional identity, immigrants are asked where they come from and where they feel at home. As they have changed geographical location, everyday interaction forces them to define themselves in relation of geographical locations. In coming to terms with their new situations, they are likely to construct their new identity by comparing and relating their old and their new residence, and it is an open question whether they rather compare local communities, nation-states or larger geographical units. The probability to focus on the European level could be a function of the distance between the original place of stay and the new European destination – in a larger distance, larger features are better visible than details. While the history of past conflicts between nation-states and the economic and social imbalances of the presence play a role from an internal perspective (Meinhof 2003) and citizens of Europe are exposed to media coverage of European bureaucratic failures (Bruter 2004:27), these aspects are less important from an extra-European perspective.

While this ‘myopia’-argument claims a comparative advantage of non-Europeans to see common features of Europe, it does not necessarily mean that the constructed Europe is associated with positive values and characteristics. However, Europe as a whole is comparatively wealthy, secure and stable, in comparison to many places in the world. This could lead non-Europeans from poorer and less stable regions to see Europe in a positive light.

In addition, constructing a positive Other may have a function in national discourse, particularly to shift the emphasis of national discourses to other policies or attitudes that are perceived to be more progressive. In the German discourse for example, some Scandinavian countries and particularly the Netherlands have often functioned as the positive Other in national discourses on education or immigration policies (Vogel 2003-Einleitung). From a non-European perspective, Europe has a potential to be constructed as a positive Other. For example Rifkin constructs a ‘European dream’ in contrast to a fading American dream (Rifkin 2004).

So while there is some reason to think that people from outside Europe may construct Europe as a positive Other, the question is whether such views are sustainable when they become immigrants. In theories of the construction of a nation state, it is stated that nations construct immigrants as the (negative) Other. "Othering the immigrant is functional to the development of national identity, and to achieving or enhancing national cohesion. The immigrant is a potential Threatening Other because s/he crosses the national boundaries, thus challenging the ingroup's identification with a specific culture, territory or ethnic origin, as well as the overall categorisation of people into nationals and Others." (Triandafyllidou 2001:55).
Can this argument be transferred to the European level? According to Michael Riketta’s and Roland Wakenhut’s interpretation of studies, the EU is so heterogeneous that such a mechanism does not work on the European level (Riketta and Wakenhut, 2002:51). There is a problem in the transfer of the argument to the European level, because the abolishment of national boundaries is a key element of the European unification process.

To support the unification process, EU institutions have propagated the slogan ‘unity in diversity’ since the 1970s as a principle of integration in the European Union (Wintle, 1996b). Defining immigrants as the Other because they are different is a difficult strategy for a political unit that propagates diversity as one of its key features. If we assume that actors try to achieve a certain degree of internal consistency of their arguments, ‘Othering’ immigrants is not fully functional to promote cohesion at the European level. On the other hand, immigrants could find the appreciation of diversity attractive. Immigrants may identify more easily with a geographical-political unit that propagates diversity, while it may be more difficult to identify with a specific nation, because nation states often include ethnic features that immigrants cannot fully acquire. Thus, there is a logical reason that immigrants appreciation of diversity in their own interest may also contribute to their appreciation of the European Union as a political unit that propagates their interest, while the native European tendency to present immigrants as the threatening Other which is presented as functional for the national level leads to inconsistencies at the European level.

There is also a practical reason to think that identifying as European might be an attractive option for future immigrants. It is likely that a considerable percentage of future immigrants will belong to the highly qualified elites that are mobile beyond national borders. Especially the rising numbers of foreign students are seen as a pool of future immigrants (OECD, 2001). Some of them may have no primary geographical attachment at all so that they could be characterised as ‘global nomad’ (Düvell und Vogel 2006), and some of them may rather be inclined to develop a European orientation than a national orientation. The citizenship of a specific nation state may be relevant above all because it allows for being in several EU states. Imagine a Chinese immigrant that studies in Italy, makes her doctorate in England, marries a German and moves to Germany to join the husband’s family, and later moves with her husband to work in Brussels. This immigrant would probably like to gain the German citizenship, but Europe sounds as more likely identity dimension than the German nation state, and this would certainly not mean that she is or causes any integration problems.

3. Exploring essays – data and methods

How individuals construct their social world can be reconstructed by methods of qualitative analysis (Strauss, 1998; Mayring, 2003). The data for this part consists of 243 short essays. The essays were part of an application to participate in the European research project POLITIS, involving training in two summer schools and conducting three interviews with active immigrants for a small compensation. Applications included an essay which was announced as follows:

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1 POLITIS. ‘Building Europe with New Citizens? An inquiry into civic participation of naturalized citizens and foreign residents of 25 states’ financed as Special Targeted Research Project by the European Commission, DG research in the 6th research framework under ‘Citizens and governance in the knowledge based societies’. For more information, see www.uni-oldenburg.de/politis-europe.

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A short essay (800 to 1200 words) on the question: What does Europe mean to you personally? We are just interested in collecting personal opinions of students from all over the world. Equally, we are looking for candidates who are able to communicate their ideas in English. So don't be afraid to write down your thoughts, you are not selected on the scientific quality of your essay.

Essays were separated from the applications and entered into a database in a software programme for qualitative data analysis. A limited number of characteristics of the writer were kept in anonymous essays: Country of origin, country of study, gender, length of stay in the European Union (born in the EU, in the EU since 2004, in the EU before 2004).

3 out of 5 essays are written by women. However, exploring for gender differences in the construction of Europe for the purpose of this paper did not lead to results.

172 essays are written by Non-EU students, of whom 53 had only a short residence of a maximum of one year at the time of writing the essay. In the analysis, I concentrate on the perceptions non-EU citizens, using the remaining 71 EU-citizens as a control group. A wide variety of national backgrounds is represented: Essay writers are born in 69 different countries and study in 21 different EU countries. For the purpose of quotations, I refer to the number of the essay, the country of origin and of study (for example 2Nigeria_Ireland means essay no 2 was written by a Nigerian-born person studying in Ireland). Table 1 in the appendix shows the distribution of the sample according to country of origin and study, demonstrating a wide variety of different origin and receiving country contexts.

The contested concept of Europe is a topic of this paper. Still, I also have to use the term in describing the background of the students. When I speak of ‘European’ or ‘Non-European’ applicants in this contribution, I refer to Europeans in a geographic sense including Russia and Turkey at the contested edges of the continent, while I speak of EU and non-EU if I refer to the political unit only.

It is important to be aware that the essays may have a positive bias towards Europe. The essay writers were applicants for participation in a European research project, so that we can assume an interest in Europe. Writers could have assumed that a positive attitude towards Europe enhances their chances of being selected. As this paper is in search of positive ways to describe Europe from an outside perspective, this is rather an advantage than a disadvantage. For this study, it is important to see how and what they portray as positive.

There are also a considerable number of critical reflections in the essays so that critical aspects can be explored. Group discussions at the summer school were used to evoke more controversial positions. Concerning most aspects, group discussions confirmed and repeated what can be found in the essays, but the essays deliver much clearer and more balanced formulations in better English so that I decided to use primarily this database for analysis.

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2 In total, the project received more than 280 applications. Some applications did not contain essays, others were from people who lived and studied outside the EU, for a few, we could not make out the country of origin or study. The software programme is MAX.QDA2 - see their website for the special features of the programme http://www.maxqda.de/

3 Originally, POLITIS only tried to win students and PhD-researchers who are born in Non-EU countries, but studying in all EU countries. For some EU-countries, mostly in the new member states, the deadline was extended and additional applications of EU citizens were accepted in a second call, as the first call had not generated enough responses.

4 To get a better idea of controversial issues, there were eight group discussion with a total of 71 students. Contradicting statements from the essays were used to evoke discussions. All group discussions were
Quantitative statements like ‘in many essays’ or ‘in a few essays’ are meant to give the reader an orientation how often patterns are found in the sample. They are not meant to imply any statement about the distribution of these patterns in any group or population. However, if patterns show up in many essays, this implies that they have shown up in a high variety of contexts so that it may be worth to think about further exploration or even quantitative measurement.

A coding structure was developed to represent the way Europe was constructed in the essays, and that sort statements referring to characteristics of Europe.\(^5\) The coding structure was developed from the material, using clear indicators whenever possible. Text analysis mainly entailed focussed reading of coded segments in search of patterns, and confirmation of patterns by context-sensitive readings of full essays and by searching for contrasts and contradictions in other essays (Rubin and Rubin, 1995:251).

4. Key results

This section concentrates on the questions of how non-EU citizens construct Europe, what meaning the term Europe has for them, which characteristics are associated with Europe, and how Europe is used as an identity dimension.

4.1. The construction of Europe

In this section, essays are analysed under the question how they derive the ‘category’ Europe. Applicants had to answer an open question, and they were encouraged to share their personal thoughts on the topic, so they had to decide how they wanted to convey their ideas. As could be expected from academics, quite a few essays summarize and comment on academic and political debates. Others refer to values propagated by the European Union, as they may be easily found via web-searches. Ideals of the European Union have definitely found their way into the essays, as there are numerous summarizing statements displaying variations of self-descriptions of the European Union as they can be found in the web. Whether the questions is critically framed or openly embraced, embedded in academic or political debates or in personal experience, nearly all of the essays try to give a personal answer.

In order to make best use of the originality of the sample, I concentrate here on the construction of Europe via personal experiences inside and outside the continent.

Bruter assumes that experiences like family origins in another country, speaking foreign languages, travelling or living in another European country, no passports and border control in Schengen area, or the common currency may impact on EU citizens’ European identification (Bruter 2005:32). EU-citizens in the sample also refer to some of these experiences. Some of

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\(^5\) Particular thanks to my student assistant Silvia Kulisch. The advanced student of intercultural education has coded all essays between February and May 2006.
them highlight in addition their experiences outside Europe: When travelling in other parts of the world, some of them related to themselves as European for the first time, either because their experiences with Africa, America or Asia seemed to be more different than their experiences in other European countries, or simply because nobody would know their country of origin so that they found it convenient to be recognised as European, as one Estonian emphasised.

Non-Europeans referred to the following experiences outside Europe:

- Meeting Europeans abroad – whether tourists, missionaries, or teachers - is described as contributing to the idea of Europe in some essays (‘Europe as a continent has always fascinated me since my school days when I had teachers who were European in origin’ 106Papua New Guinea_Great Britain).
- The influence of return migrants from Europe is referred to (‘the stories of our friends who had travelled abroad; stories about clean streets and well-organised life but also about hard labour and fighting with the unwelcoming system as an immigrant’ 36Bulgaria_Czech Republic)
- Media coverage that is associated with Europe is mentioned in many essays (‘media portrayals of Europe through visuals in TV and magazines’ 2Nigeria_Ireland),
- Applicants from former colonies frequently but not always mention the current influence of former colonising countries (‘In Cameroon for example, there are two official languages (French and English) inherited from the colonisation (France and England’ 20Cameroon_Germany);
- The perception of European arts, music and literature in the own country is noted as important in some essays (‘In the biggest city Shanghai, where I’m from, symphonies by Beethoven and Bach are played all year round at concert halls; people are so familiar with the themes that even a housewife can hymn some of the most famous master pieces.’ 86 China_Great Britain)
- In a few cases, Europe is associated with the visible influence of EU development aid or EU projects in their country or city (‘The EU now is ‘the main contributor to the state building process in the Palestine that started after the signature of the Oslo Accords between PLO and Israeli in 1993’ 112Palestine_Italy).

In many cases, students distance themselves from experiences and perceptions of Europe in their country of origin and contrast it with their own personal experiences which they have made since they are inside Europe. They refer to their travel experiences, their experiences as students, and to immigration experiences in Europe – no matter whether they are permanent immigrants themselves or because of their connections to immigrants from their country or region of origin.

More often than not, this contrasting is portrayed as disillusionment, especially by African students. An idealised image of Europe is corrected with experiences of European reality. In particular, students realise that the wealth as shown in TV-programmes is not evenly distributed, that the ideals of democracy and rule of law are not lived quite as well as propagated, or that although Europe brought Christianity to other parts of the world, Christianity does not seem to play an important role in the everyday life of people in Europe. In addition, they note that foreign nationals in general and black person in particular may be faced with discrimination and racism.
My ideas about Europeans have equally been enhanced. All over Africa, it is known that all Europeans are wealthy. My experience however shows that this is not true. Although institutional safety valves such as unemployment insurance, sick allowances, subsidized or free housing are available, there are still poor people. There are streams of unemployed people. There are equally those who have voluntarily decided to become drug addicts, homeless, drinking and sleeping in the streets, begging left and right. (38Cameroon_Sweden)

The Europe I encountered in many European countries I have been in was a Europe of barriers, capitalism, individualism, passport controls, racism, and national differences. (10Nigeria_Ireland)

However, personal experience in Europe does not necessarily lead to disillusionment, especially when the original image was formed in comparison with the United States.

At this time, I began to recognize the arrogance that was inherent in the idea that progress was non-existent in Europe (88USA_France)

Europe would economically somewhat lag behind the United States (which are far better known compared to Europe), however has a rich culture, was shaken by various wars, but now appears to be politically and socially stable. (181-Filipines-Austria)

People may well use the term Europe without having a clear conception of its borders, as the ways of constructing the term imply. The next section is in search of explicit and implicit definitions.

**4.2. Definitions of Europe**

In historical perspective, Europe was constructed in contrast to the oriental and islamic world and to America, and also the division between a ‘modern’ Western Europe and a ‘backward’ Eastern Europe played a role (Strath, 2002), implying different borders of Europe.

How is Europe defined in the essays? The essay question left this deliberately open. Some people e-mailed me during the application process, asking whether they were expected to refer to the European Union. In many essays, applicants made a conscious effort to give a definition or raise the question. Often, definitions were implicitly involved. While there are no new patterns to define Europe, it is still interesting to note how the definitions are used.

**4.2.1. Europe as a continent or geographical region**

Quite a few essays refer to a geographical definition of Europe, often relating it to school knowledge, and contrast it with some other definition of Europe that they currently use.

Of course, Europe is more than simply a physical place that can be located on a map or visited. (17 USA_Great Britain)

Geographical definitions of Europe are rarely consistently used in the argumentation.

**4.2.2. Europe as the European Union**

I had expected that people from other continents would often associate Europe with the European Union, while applicants from inside the geographical scope and outside the EU
would discuss the term and claim the belonging of their country to Europe. Indeed, we can find this pattern. From the 122 marked passages that explicitly discuss the distinction between the EU as a political unit and Europe in a wider sense, only a handful are written by applicants that come from Africa, America or Asia. In particular, Turkish and Russian applicants discuss the term, assuming that their country does not belong to Europe as it does not belong to the Union, or taking a position that their country partly belongs to Europe.

In many essays, people from other continents associate Europe with the European Union – either explicitly or implicitly.

The first and important positive aspect of Europe is its aim. In fact Europe has to understand that to become more powerful in order to challenge the strong actors - I think of USA, Russia, Japan (25 Cameroon_France).

The identification of the European Union with Europe is also found in essays by people from non-EU member states in the geographical Europe, but more rarely implicitly as in the last statements.

The word Europe means more and more the European Union. The European Union doesn’t mean the European continent, and most probably never in the future will, but the word is more and more connected with this political-economical-social phenomenon. (101 Roumania_Italy)

In fact, I view Europe as the EU and consider them synonymous. I believe that these terms should be used interchangeably because the Europe that is strong and that is a leading block in the world today is the European Union. (111 Bulgaria_Greece)

I trust that Ukraine will eventually become the part of Europe. (122 Ukraine_Czech Republic)

4.2.3. Europe as the West

To identify Europe as ‘the West’ is a different but related pattern. Essays that define Europe as the West associate it with capitalism and wealth, rule of law and democratic values, particularly in the East of the geographical Europe.

First of all ‘real’ Europe was of course only the western one. Actually communist bloc countries were never referred to as Europe, even as Eastern Europe. (71 Georgia_Hungary)

Or, if we for example imply by ‘European’ a particular set of moral standards and values, that it appears to be that there are some Western civilizations as the United States, Canada and even Japan that share the same system of estimates as well. (134 Russia_Estonia)

Even though the Republic of Moldova is a small country, since 1991, when it gained its independence till nowadays it is in the situation when it has to choose whom it wants to follow West (Europe) or East (Russia). By this statement I wanted to emphasize that this ‘eternal’ struggle had a big impact on the people’s way of thinking and mine personally too. (63 Moldavia_Hungary)
Vanessa Prinz (2005) finds a similar association of Europe with the West in her study of Tanzanian students in Tanzania, and it can also be found in some essays by Africans. This concept is at the same time smaller than the geographical Europe, excluding for example the war-torn conflict areas in the Balkans, and broader, as the distinction between Europe and other Western countries is either not drawn or not considered to be important.

4.2.4. *Europe as a distinct cultural unit*

While associating Europe with the West is a kind of very broad cultural definition, there are also distinct cultural definitions. Cultural definitions of Europe refer to similarities between the different European countries and peoples and their shared history and heritage.

There are Europeans and there is also a common mentality, common roots, traditions and values, specifically European. (53_Romania_Hungary)

In social scientific discussions, the cultural concept is highly contested. Wintle for example emphasizes Europe’s shared heritage, though recognising that it is not experienced equally everywhere. According to his analysis, it includes the Roman Empire, Christianity, enlightenment, industrialisation and the nation-building processes (Wintle, 1996a:13). Michael Malmborg and Bo Strath criticise Wintle for taking the essential existence of Europe for granted. They assume that the idea of culture as a unitary framework is not adequate, as well as the notion that social integration requires cultural cohesion. They emphasize that Europeanisation is about contention and pluralisation (Malmborg and Strath, 2002:6). Cultural arguments are used to argue against the accession of new member states and the admission of new immigrants, as for example Hans-Ulrich Wehler argues that the accession of Turkey to the EU would destroy it, by undermining its historical identity that is based on Christianity (Wehler, 2004). There are a handful of essays that argue in such a way.

This leads to one of the present question of multicultural Europe that is how to understand Islam and its compatibility with Europe’s system of values. Just a fact that EU is preparing talks about possible membership of Turkey to EU is for me bad sign for Europe. It is hard to define where natural border of Europe to the East is, but taking Turkey in EU, means that at the end there are many other countries that can later on want to get into EU. This would lead to total lost of thought making the union just for Europe, and final lost of European identity. (107_Yugoslavia_CzechRepublic)

While Christianity is used here to argue for the non-accession of states with Islamic traditions as new member states, it can also be found as an inclusive feature in the essays. Many applicants claim that Christianity links them with Europe.

Indeed, France has influenced Vietnam not only economically and politically, but also spiritually, by bringing us Christianity, a tie that will forever keep Europe in the Vietnamese heart. (12_Vietnam_Belgium)

While most definitions evoked only scholarly interest in group discussions at the summer school, reference to a culturally defined Europe provoked a more heated exchange of opinions in some groups, as some discussants seemed to imply a superiority of Europeans or an exclusionary cultural concept in relation to a non-European Other. This indicates that definitions of Europe that imply a principal closure against newcomers are a sensitive issue, whether newcomers are new countries or new immigrants.
However, also cultural definitions may be open, if they see diversity and tolerance as the core element of the culture. This is not only propagated on European Union websites, but also integrated in personal European perceptions of many essay writers. The quote about European commonalities at the beginning of this text section is set at the end of a positively connotated description of life in multicultural Romanian community. The preceding sentence clarifies the context:

I feel in Europe wherever I am faced with a humanity which, although ethnically diverse, proposes and allows anyone the freedom of exercising one’s traditions and of shaping one’s own individuality in accordance with personal aspirations. (53Romania_Hungary)

It is interesting to note that the appreciation of diversity can also be seen as a core element of the European culture.

To summarize: We find frequent references to geographical definitions of Europe, but these are rarely left uncontested. Many students use Europe as a synonymon for the European Union, but there are also many essays that make the difference explicit, especially when the writers originate in the periphery of the geographical Europe. A broad cultural definition of Europe as the West is found in some essays, while others try to make a distinct cultural definition, referring to European commonalities and shared heritage. This distinct cultural definition sometimes includes the appreciation of diversity as specifically European.

4.3. Positive and negative characteristics of Europe

Being aware that the question about Europe’s characteristics can be related to the normatively loaded debate about the role that culture should play in the process of European unification, we can still ask what people see as common features of Europe, as for example in the qualitative part of Bruter’s study (2004, 2005). He analyses focus group discussions with participants from the Netherlands, the UK and France and exposes them to news about the EU and symbols of the EU, before discussing more general issues of European experiences and identification. In the context of these stimuli, it is likely that most people speak about Europe in the sense of the European Union. As negative characteristics of Europe, discussants find heavy bureaucracy, a focus on tiny questions, internal dissent between member-states, obscure negotiations, unsatisfactory compromises, while positive characteristics include economic development, internal co-operation, cultural initiatives, policy diffusion and peace. Many of his respondents, namely in Britain, had the impression that the EU and their institutions often get blamed in the media for what goes wrong with 'the legislation on bananas' and other details. The EU and Europe are used synonymous.

One cannot think about Europe without thinking of slightly stupid, heavy mechanisms, bogus laws on the size of apples and salmon and so on! (Bruter, 2004: 27-28).

Non-EU students are definitely able to think about Europe without this, as there was no single statement with a similar content in any essay of Third Country students. The topic ‘bureaucracy’ was only found in a small number of essays, and nearly all were from the minority of EU nationals in the sample – in contents being very much in the line with Bruter’s results.
Only few Non-EU students found it worth to mention EU bureaucracy as a negative aspect in their essays about Europe. If they did, they referred to the visa application process and the treatment in embassies that were attributed to exclusionary EU-policies.

In addition, two explicitly positive comments may explain the context in which non EU citizens may see EU bureaucracy:

I think that the famous clumsy functioning bureaucracy of the Union is only a latent and unavoidable result of a good-working democratic pluralism and of a commitment to an efficient enforcing of ethnic and religious minority rights. (137Roumania_Hungary)

Although the bureaucracy in Europe is huge, it has ‘a human face’, that means it is friendly to citizens. It is clear what each person should do in order to settle his or her problems. (245Ukraine_Poland)

With regard to the perception of positive characteristics of Europe, similar features can be identified as in Bruter’s study. There are numerous summarizing statements on the positive aspects of Europe. Some of them are dry enumerations of terms like ‘democracy, freedom and peace’, others are enthusiastic appraisals of European achievements. The statement by a Turkish woman in Hungary summarizes best the logic of positive evaluations, highlighting that European developments give hope in the face of perceived shortcomings of their background. Such statements can be found in many other essays, in different combinations and orders and different degrees of concreteness.

Europe symbolizes a hope that corruption plaguing economic life and causing major financial crises would wither away, standard of living would ameliorate as poverty diminishes, respect for human rights and freedom of speech would be secured, political life would be emancipated from military influence, fundamentalist Islam would cease to be threat for losing personal freedoms, and a more tolerant society respecting multiculturalism, religious and ethnic diversity would ensue. (150Turkey_Hungary)

Depending on their comparative frame (which is usually their country or region of origin and sometimes the USA), essays highlight also the development towards peace, the openness of the educational system, the enjoyment of leisure and wealth, technological progress, democratic participation opportunities, free access to information, the protection of the environment, and the prevalence of the rule of law. Each aspect could be dealt with in more depth. For the purpose of this essay, it may be sufficient to point out that most authors seem to be in general aware of the deficiencies of the European institutions and institutions in Europe, but that their positive evaluation results from their comparative reflection. The following quote serves at highlighting this:

In my country we have two ex-presidents in jail due to tax evasion, fraud, government in their own interest, among other felonies. There is a third ex-president (who currently lives in Switzerland) who is waiting to get chased by the Interpol, but this is something you do not see in Europe. I know the EU is not free of corruption, but these gentlemen earned almost three million dollars in illegal activities in the last ten years (which is nothing to the neighbour country Nicaragua, which’s president stole ten million dollars in ten years, but still this is a shock). So Europe is something I look up to, for transparency, leanness, cleanness, political, social and economical freedom and stability. (151Costa Rica_Germany)
I had expected that the colonial past would lead to clearly negative associations with Europe. However, while many applicants from colonial countries mention the colonial history, positive and negative connotations are mixed. The following quotation from the essay of a Cameroonian in Ireland may give an explanation, pointing to the positive and negative influences of Europe in the past, but also to the present situation that is rather associated with hope:

Out of Europe, Europeans have invaded and occupied lands and subjected the people under degrading and inhuman treatment. They brought hope and developments in other parts. This has led to different parts of the world having different feelings and opinions about Europe and its people. For at one point or the other, Europeans dominated either negatively or positively events around the world, to my mind, they today stand the best position to right the wrongs and emancipate mankind from both mental and physical slavery. (73Cameroon_Ireland)

Colonial influences may even be quoted in an identity discourses, as can be seen in the next section.

### 4.4. Europe as an identity dimension

When European essay writers refer to Europe as an identity dimension, they often do not deduct it from their definition of Europe. Social categorisation is clearly distinct from social identification, at least in some essays.

‘I am Georgian and therefore I am European’, declared prime-minister of Georgia Zurab Zhvania upon the admittance of Georgia to the Council of Europe. Somehow I was never so sure of that. I have never had the feeling that I am European and I have almost no doubts that there must be a particular feeling - feeling of being European. (71Georgia_Hungary)

Travel and migration experiences may create a sense of belonging.

And for the first time I feel that Europe is my home. And I think myself as a European...yeah, although Romania is only a candidate for the EU membership. It is not only the geographical position of my homeland. This should have made me feel European before. No, it is not that simple. I guess, that all the experiences I have had since 2000, the people I met and changed my life, all these contributed to enrich my personality and make me feel like a European citizen. (115Roumania_Germany)

I got to know Europe ‘inside out’ - as a legal migrant. I underwent through a variety of positive and negative moments, all sorts of attitudes but still the image of Europe looked quite appealing for me since the positive memories and emotions prevailed. (253Ukraine_Poland)

Most essay writers are students who live in the perspective to return to their countries of origin. Thus, they reflect on the concept of Europe as the ‘Other’, while identity expressions are reserved for their country or region of origin.

However, those who do reflect on ‘Europe’ as part of their own identity are of special interest for this study, as their reflections may point a way to a positive conceptualisation of European identity by immigrants.
One type of reflection refers to the colonial influences. A Nigerian argues, after describing the influence of different colonial powers in his country of origin and their influence until today:

I am largely a product of the above historical condition and socialisation and hence, can claim to be more European than most natives of single European nations due to the multiple European influences, which go beyond the conventional historical, national and cultural boundaries of Europe. (10Nigeria_Ireland)

Another type of reflection refers to the immigration experience in Europe, claiming the need to accept immigrant as equals:

My perception is that migrants don’t have opportunities, the same ones the native populations are ensured. That must make Western societies reflect on, because social peacefulness may be endangered by the new migrants feeling frustrated to be outsiders. (16Taiwan_Italy)

A recently arrived student from Armenia is enthusiastic about Europe as an immigration country and plans to settle in the Europe. He praises Europe’s potential for his education, career and personal growth and as an immigration country:

Europe is a state with very rich historical values and it makes the newcomers able to share that historical values. ... Europeans have some peculiar cultural traits, but they are deeply proud of having built a society that promotes equality between the sexes, tolerance and inclusiveness. ... A generous refugee policy in some countries has turned United Europe into a medley of different cultures, a process that has enriched its own culture along the way. All world religions are represented in Europe. ... A number of special programs have been created in order to actively oppose unfair or offensive treatment on the grounds of race, skin color, national or ethnic origin or religious faith. ... In conclusion, my decision to migrate to Europe is mainly conditioned by the fact that a stable convergence to the unification and integration Europe is experiencing now provides potential economical, social and cultural benefits to immigrants. ... After graduating from the university and starting working in Europe I am looking forward to get an opportunity to contribute to the social and political life of EU in comparable level to the one provided by the EU natives. (47Armenia_Czech Republic)

While this quotation certainly does not display a widely shared perception of European attitudes towards immigration and integration, it lays out a policy that would be attractive for future immigrants. At the same time, it displays well what non-EU immigrants might have to offer to the Union: enthusiasm for the European project, eagerness to receive education and training, willingness to work and to contribute to the society, gratitude for being accepted as equal.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the meaning of Europe in 243 essays written by students and PhD-researchers from all over the world. They give an insight how Europe is constructed outside its geographical boundaries by different types of experiences with European people, media, cultural goods and policies. In many cases, these European ‘exports’ are seen as something interesting and desirable. Europe is associated with hopes for peaceful and democratic developments. Concerning experiences inside Europe, there is a clear pattern of disillusionment mainly in essays written by Africans, on the one hand related to the confrontation of an idealised Europe with reality, on the other hand related to discriminatory
experiences in European countries. On the other hand, there were also cases when experiences in Europe were described as more positive than expected, especially when the concept of Europe prior to migration was rather vague, and Europe was characterised as a part of the West that is less important than the United States.

Europe is defined more often explicitly than implicitly in the essays, as a geographical region, a political or cultural unit, or ‘the West’. Often, Europe and the European Union are used synonymously, whether this is explicitly acknowledged or not. While over-regulation and bureaucracy are important for EU citizens’ perceptions of Europe, non EU essay writers concentrate on more fundamental positive developments. Namely respect for human rights, the rule of law, and an effort to enhance the quality of life for individuals, enabling them to gain education, wealth, information, participation, and live in a protected environment are highlighted in numerous essays characteristics of Europe. While many of these aspects could also apply to some single European countries, the appreciation of diversity is clearly associated with the European level. This attitude is recognised and cherished in many different ways in numerous essays. If the heart of European culture would have to be defined from the essays, the appreciation of diversity had to be named as its core element.

In politics, the appreciation of diversity is propagated by the European Union level institutions and by European governments in an effort to proceed on the way of integrating diverse European countries. However, essay analysis confirms that there is also a potential to apply the slogan of ‘unity in diversity’ to immigrant integration. It clearly appeals to highly qualified and highly mobile students and researchers. Some of them are immigrants, and others are likely to become immigrants into the European Union in the future. Looking at the essays, it seems that identifying as European might be easier for high potentials than identifying nationally or locally. This is an issue that deserves further research efforts in the future. Identifying as European is currently rather discouraged than encouraged by local and national integration policies. If Europe was offered and propagated as an identity option for future immigrants, they could feel comfortable to build this attachment into their concept of their self.

Anna Triandafyllidou argued in her study on national identities in Europe, that Othering the immigrant is functional to the development of national identity, and to achieving or enhancing national cohesion (Triandafyllidou, 2001). Building on the exploration of Third country students’ conceptions of Europe, I propose to look deeper into another possible relation: The offer to include immigrants into ‘Us Europeans’ (Us-sing instead of Othering) could be functional to the development of a European identity, as they strengthen a particular element of this culture – the appreciation of diversity. It is also functional to immigrant integration in Europe as it may help immigrants to redefine their geographical-political belonging in an immigration situation. As has been shown in other studies, local, regional, national and European identity dimensions are not mutually exclusive but can even be mutually reinforcing (Riketta and Wakenhut, 2002:44) When immigrants develop a positive attachment towards Europe, this is not only good for European integration, but also for immigrant integration in Europe.
6. References

7. Annex

Table 1: Country of origin and country of study of the essay writer

<p>| Country of study | Country of Study | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | Total |
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| ALB              |                  | 1 | 4 | 2 | 7 |
| ARG              |                  | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| ARM              |                  | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| AUS              |                  | 1 | 1 |
| AUT              |                  | 14| 1 | 1 | 17|
| BEL              |                  | 1 | 1 |
| BGR              |                  | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 11|
| BIH              |                  | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| BLR              |                  | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| BRA              |                  | 1 | 1 |
| CHL              |                  | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| CHN              |                  | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 8 |
| CMR              |                  | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| COL              |                  | 1 | 1 | 2 |
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| CRI              |                  | 1 | 1 |
| CUB              |                  | 1 | 1 |
| DNK              |                  | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| ECU              |                  | 1 | 1 |
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