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Hope for Europe? **Students from Germany, Croatia and South-East Europe on Europe and the European unification process**

Introduction

The following text provides an overview of the evaluation of essays written by students from eight countries on the topic of Hope Europe? as part of a cooperation project between the Centre for German and European Studies CGES (University of Zagreb, University of Regensburg) and the Hanns Seidel Foundation Zagreb HSS and presented at an international conference at the University of Zagreb on 29 November 2024 Hope Europe? Politics meets students. European perceptions of students from Southeast Europe, Croatia and Germany were presented by lecturers from the universities involved in the project in the form of PowerPoint presentations (see <https://unizg-cges.eu/>; Projects)

The project involved universities from three EU countries - Germany, University of Regensburg (DE); Greece, University of Thessaly (GR); Croatia, University of Zagreb (HR) -, four EU accession candidates from South-East Europe - Albania, University of Tirana (AL); Bosnia and Herzegovina, University of Sarajevo (BiH); North Macedonia, St. Cyril and Methodius University of Tirana (AL); and the University of Tirana (BiH). Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje (MK); Serbia, University of Novi Sad (RS) - and the potential candidate country Kosovo, from the University of Gjakova (KOS).

The essays were to be written by students on a voluntary basis in their native language without further instructions and anonymised. The aim was to find out how students from these eight countries with different social and historical developments and conditions deal with the concept of Europe, which topics they address and how, which values they associate with Europe, what future they see for themselves and their country in Europe and where they think the challenges, problems and opportunities of the European unification process lie. It was expected that, on the one hand, the different country-specific experiences of the students would help to determine their views of Europe, but that, on the other hand, intergenerational and transnational commonalities in everyday student life would also be included in the image of Europe. Of particular interest was whether and how differences and similarities between the EU states, the candidate countries and the EU applicant country Kosovo are reflected in the essays.

In this context, the essays' topic of "Hope Europe? was deliberately posed as a question and not reduced to the European Union.

A total of 127 essays were submitted by the students: Croatia 17, Greece 20, Germany 21, Albania 30, Bosnia and Herzegovina 13, North Macedonia 10, Serbia 13, Kosovo 26. The varying number of essays can be explained primarily by the pilot nature of this project, which could not be integrated into the students' everyday studies due to the tight time frame, and the voluntary nature of the students' participation, some of whom saw writing an essay as an additional burden.

The original idea was to involve students from study programmes with different European connections in the project: e.g. study programmes with an internal perspective, which, like the study of the national language, are primarily focused on their own country, and study programmes with an external perspective, which, like the study of economics, have an international and European orientation from

the outset. This approach was based on the idea that students from these degree programmes with different approaches to and knowledge of Europe also arrive at different assessments of the European unification process.

However, this division of the essays according to contrasting degree programmes with different European connections was only partially successful: in Albania with essays by students of German studies and economics and in Kosovo with essays from German studies, medicine and political science. In all other universities, students either from German studies or from very different fields of study took part (see <https://unizg-cges.eu/>; publications).

The essays were qualitatively analysed according to certain criteria by university lecturers from the respective universities participating in the project and presented at the conference in Zagreb. The conference languages in Zagreb were German and Croatian. Simultaneous interpreting was provided in both languages. The PPPs were presented in German and Croatian.

The evaluation of the essays is summarised below, focusing on four points: Students' understanding of Europe and expectations of the European unification process, values, range of topics and self-positioning. Country-specific focal points are integrated into these points.

1. Understanding of Europe and expectations of the European unification process

All students viewed Europe as a whole, as a cultural and geographical area that goes beyond the European Union and therefore naturally includes the countries of South Eastern Europe. This is formulated particularly emphatically in an essay from Bosnia and Herzegovina, which succinctly states: 'We Bosnians are also Europeans'. This is probably based on the fear that Europe is identified with the EU and that the term therefore produces exclusions that place the EU accession candidates outside of Europe, thus delegitimising their legitimate claim to belong to the EU.

The fact that this fear is not unfounded was demonstrated by the question of how the students assessed EU enlargement. While this aspect is virtually absent in the essays from Germany, Greece and Croatia, the perspective of EU enlargement plays a central role in the essays from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia, and admission to the EU is seen as a benefit and necessity for the further democratic and economic development and political stability of these countries. It is not explicitly stated, but implied in the students' opinions, that non-admission to the EU or the delaying of this process could jeopardise the political stability of the entire region and lead to new upheavals.

Despite this fundamental affirmation of EU accession, the EU is viewed quite critically by students in South East Europe. Advantages and disadvantages, hopes and fears are compared and weighed against each other and confronted with country-specific prerequisites and challenges that go hand in hand with the accession of their own country to the EU and which must be overcome in the countries themselves if this process is to succeed. In the essays from Germany and Croatia, however, this aspect of comparing the advantages and disadvantages of EU membership is completely absent. Although problems of the European unification process are recognised, they are seen as fundamentally surmountable and overall the essays from both countries are fundamentally optimistic about the European project and do not question its success.

In contrast, the opinions in the essays from South-East Europe are far more differentiated and critical.

The essays emphasise the positive developments and hopes associated with the EU in:

- GR: freedom of movement, mobility to study and work, diversity, cultural exchange, peacekeeping, implementation of human rights;
- AL: cultural exchange, economic development, access to the labour market, education and innovation, technological progress, political stability; democracy, rule of law, more stable future, promotion of dialogue and peace. The only differences between the German studies and economics and computer science students involved in the project were that the former emphasised the cultural and historical diversity in the EU and in Europe as a continent, while the latter focused on the political and economic dimension of the EU and addressed this in terms of its significance for Albania's development;
- BiH: Hope for a better and more stable life, reduction of corruption;
- MK: Hope for a better future, better jobs, financial aid, more contacts and encounters with young people from other countries;
- RS: Cultural exchange, mutual appreciation, safeguarding and protection of all for equal rights;
- KOS: EU as a peace project for diplomatic conflict resolution, cultural diversity and unity, economic cooperation, democracy, rule of law, peace and free mobility in the EU.

Fears and negative developments in the EU are mentioned in

- GR: lack of solidarity and unity, economic inequalities between states, weakening of democracy, strengthening of the extreme right, failure to fulfil promises on a political, social and economic level, lack of implementation of core EU values in practice such as democracy, equality, justice, solidarity and human rights;
- AL: bureaucracy and inequality;
- BiH: Double standards of the EU, gap between rich and poor, bureaucracy too slow in implementing promises of democracy and the rule of law, lack of equal opportunities with EU citizens;
- MK: Fear of giving up parts of their own cultural identity and history, having already changed the constitutional name of their own country in order to be accepted into the EU and then not having progressed beyond the status of candidate country after all. In this context, commitment to the EU is only demanded while preserving one's own identity;
- RS: European fatigue, violations of EU rights and values, disappointment with the EU;
- KOS: Confrontation between ideals and reality in the European community of values, increasing populist movements and nationalist tendencies in some EU member states that threaten the European unification process.

Essays from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia primarily deal with country-specific conditions and the challenges of the EU process for their own countries. The country-specific preconditions and challenges are cited in

- AL: structural problems with regard to economic instability, corruption and bureaucratic obstacles as barriers to the integration process, the need for comprehensive efforts to combat corruption, strengthen the rule of law and promote a stable economy;
- BiH: unemployment and massive emigration, corruption and war experiences of the parents' generation with effects on their own generation. This is contrasted with the cultural diversity of Sarajevo and the rich history of coexistence between Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox and Jews;
- MK: In a quote from an essay, corruption and injustice are cited as country-specific barriers to EU membership: 'The younger generation wants to break the vicious circle of corruption and injustice and promote progress and justice'.

2. Values

Firstly, it should be emphasised that the essays from all the countries involved in the project assume that Europe is a community of values to be preserved and that they associate a number of common values with Europe and the EU. These include above all: freedom, democracy, the rule of law, peace, security, justice, equality, solidarity, human rights and cultural diversity. On the other hand, however, country-specific accentuations and shifts in the prioritisation of these values can be identified.

For example, democracy is a frequently mentioned value in the essays from GR, AL, BiH, KOS, MK, hidden in RS under the keyword 'community of values', whereas democracy is explicitly mentioned less frequently in the essays from DE and HR, with *freedom* being emphasised instead, which also applies to the contributions from most other countries in South East Europe. Germany and Croatia also differ from the other countries in that the *rule of law* is one of the less frequently mentioned values here, whereas in the essays from the Southeast European countries, the rule of law is accorded great importance. MK is an exception: the rule of law is rarely mentioned here.

Peace and security as European values, on the other hand, play an important role in all essays, with varying degrees of emphasis, and are conspicuously frequent in HR, AL, BiH, KOS and RS. This accumulation certainly has its background in the specific war experiences in the region, while in DE the frequent mention of peace and security is primarily in connection with the war in Ukraine. MK and GR stand out here. There are no discussion points on peace and security, in GR at most indirectly as a reference to the past with 'Europe's susceptibility to conflict and barbarism'.

Justice, equality and *equal rights* are among the important European values in all country essays, as is *cultural diversity*. Central European values such as *solidarity* (HR, GR, RS) and *human rights* (GR, BiH), on the other hand, are only explicitly mentioned in individual contributions, but not consistently in the contributions of all countries. Apparently, there are different country-specific priorities in the students' scale of values.

3. Breadth of topics

The range of topics is extremely broad in all essays. Nevertheless, there are a few focal points. In addition to the above-mentioned European values and EU enlargement (see 1), these include above all: migration and the refugee crisis, economic prosperity and economic inequalities, mobility and education, the environment and climate change, as well as the rise of right-wing parties and nationalism as threats to the European project

It is interesting to note that, with the exception of DE and AL, where this topic is dealt with prominently, the *environment and climate change* are only mentioned in GR, HR, BiH and RS, but not in MK and KOS. The *rise of right-wing parties and nationalism* as a threat to the European project is also only discussed as a topic in some countries; here again prominently in DE and KOS and with few mentions in RS. This topic is not mentioned in the essays of any other country.

In contrast to this, *migration and the refugee crisis* are a central topic in all countries, but here too with differing approaches due to different social conditions and experiences. While in HR, BiH, RS and MK the emigration of skilled workers (particularly explicitly in MK) and young people from their own countries to the EU is addressed - one essay from BiH speaks strikingly of the personal flight of many young people due to a lack of prospects and because they see no future in Bosnia and Herzegovina - in the German essays this topic is primarily discussed in connection with the global refugee crisis and immigration to Germany. RS deals with both aspects: Migration and the refugee crisis, but no explicit treatment of this topic in the essays from GR, which seems somewhat surprising given the large number of refugees crossing the Mediterranean to GR. In HR, migration is also discussed in terms of

demographic change, a declining birth rate and an ageing society, while one essay in KOS calls for a more uniform distribution of refugees and improved social integration

The topic of *economic prosperity and economic inequalities in Europe* and, in this context, the *economy* in general play an important role in the essays of all countries involved in the project. The exception here is DE, where this topic area does not appear. It can be assumed that from the perspective of the students in DE and Germany's economic wealth, securing prosperity and living standards do not represent any immediate social challenges, unlike the students in the other European countries, and that they therefore assess this topic differently as a problem for themselves and German society. In HR, AL, BiH, MK and KOS, the EU is generally associated with prosperity and hope for a better life. Differences in prosperity and the hope of a better standard of living associated with the EU are therefore an important reason for emigration to the EU in these countries, particularly to German-speaking countries. From this perspective, economic inequalities in Europe are perceived all the more strongly (GR, AL, BiH, KOS).

The subject area of mobility and education describes a central resource for all students for their professional careers. Accordingly, the essays emphasise free access to education and the labour market in Europe and the EU's Erasmus programme as an opportunity for the future and hope for a better life. The exception here is also Germany, where the aspect of mobility is obviously seen as a given. Above all, there is a lack of personal involvement in the connection between mobility and improvement of future prospects and living standards, as identified with the EU in South-East Europe.

4. Students' self-positioning

It is striking that the students' essays not only deal with the topic 'Hope Europe?' in abstract terms, but also include personal views and statements that are essentially characterised by the students' country-specific concrete living and study conditions and expectations for the future. This aspect is particularly evident when social upheavals and contradictions have a profound impact on students' own life plans and lead to different reactions and perspectives

For example, essays from BiH emphasise that young people are worried about unemployment in their own country and that there is a high willingness to emigrate due to a lack of future prospects. In AL, personal experiences and perspectives are used against the background of family experiences to shed light on topics such as migration and cultural adaptation. In contrast, in a quote from an essay from MK, a student explains that young people in North Macedonia are prepared to shape their own future for themselves and the country if they are given the right opportunities to do so, while the essays from KOS mention concrete visions of the future of the students for the development of Europe, including in the form of demands to the EU that it should increasingly promote democratic values and enable young people to participate more in politics. The essays from DE and HR also draw on students' personal experiences and perspectives, whereas they are not a topic in the Greek contributions and only rarely appear in SR

One particularly memorable difference is that in the essays from the three EU states DE, HR and GR, despite all the optimism regarding the future of Europe, in view of the density of problems in some essays, the failure of the European unification process (DE, HR) or the dissolution of the EU (GR) is no longer ruled out, albeit rarely. In contrast, there is no mention of this in the essays from south-east Europe, which is not yet part of the EU and whose social situation is much more difficult than in the EU states. On the contrary, accession to the EU is called for as a future option and hope. However, and this is cause for concern, the fear of EU failure in DE, GR and HR, although rarely mentioned, correlates with a low level of interest in EU enlargement among students in these three countries - in

DE and HR, EU enlargement is rarely or hardly mentioned as a topic, and in GR it is not mentioned at all.

5. Concluding remarks

To summarise, the comparative analysis of the Power Point presentations of student essays on the topic of 'Hope Europe' from eight countries (Germany, Greece, Croatia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo) revealed an extremely differentiated picture of the students' views on the future of Europe and the challenges of the European unification process. This showed that the commonalities between the students about Europe as a community of values predominated by far, but that there were considerable country-specific differences with regard to the perspective on the challenges and opportunities of the European unification process, particularly between the three EU states Germany, Greece and Croatia and the EU accession candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia and the EU candidate Kosovo.

In line with the pilot nature of the project - students were surveyed for the first time in this form as part of a country comparison on the topic of 'Hope Europe?' - the results presented here are not representative. This would require a larger corpus and more precise empirical, quantitative and qualitative analyses. However, the project showed how necessary such a survey is in order to find out what the young generation actually thinks about the European unification process and where they see room for manoeuvre for themselves and their country in order to solve existing problems in the spirit of European unity. This in turn is a decisive prerequisite for winning over this generation of young Europeans for a common European future and for overcoming existing differences, resentments and gaps in knowledge.

It became clear at the international conference *Hoffnung Europa? Politics meets students*. Students from South Eastern Europe, Croatia and Germany's ideas about Europe, it was made clear by lecturers that there are considerable gaps in knowledge about Europe and the European unification process and that universities have so far failed to respond adequately to these gaps. Here, too, it would be necessary to initiate degree programme reforms that make Europe an interdisciplinary topic and that qualify students to think, research and act independently in terms of shaping the European unification process. However, there is also a lack of transnational information on the presence of a European dimension in degree programmes, which building blocks already exist at the universities and which need to be developed first, or where reforms and changes in the respective education systems and individual degree programmes could start in this respect and which obstacles stand in the way.

The discussion with students at the conference - one student from each of the eight countries took part in the conference and was represented with a short presentation - showed that there is an overwhelming need on the part of students for such interdisciplinary and interdisciplinary European study programme modules and that there is a great willingness on the part of university lecturers to take up this topic.

The Centre for German and European Studies CGES, in cooperation with the Hanns Seidel Foundation, will organise a follow-up project on this last point in Nov. 2025 at the University of Zagreb in the form of an international workshop on the topic 'Learning for Europe' - Challenges and perspectives of a European dimension of academic teaching in Southeast Europe'. The aim of the workshop is, among other things, to determine the current situation, the opportunities for action and the barriers to a European dimension in various degree programmes at selected universities in Germany, Croatia and South-East Europe and to discuss solutions.

On the basis of both projects, the CGES and its partners will develop an initiative for comprehensive empirical, quantitative and qualitative international research on this topic and prepare a funding application in the form of a multi-year European project.