COVID-19 PANDEMICS IMPACT ON UKRAINIAN STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE EU, EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND SOLIDARITY

Olena Tupakhina

Doctor of Sciences in Philology, Associate Professor at the Department of German Philology and Translation, Zaporizhzhia National University, Ukraine
e-mail: tupakhina@znu.edu.ua, orcid.org/0000-0003-2920-1167

Iryna Sikorska

Candidate of Sciences in Public Administration, Associate Professor at the Department of Cultural Studies, Mariupol State University, Ukraine
e-mail: i.sikorska@mdu.in.ua, orcid.org/0000-0002-6649-3974

Summary

The youth opinion and perceptions of the EU and EU-Ukraine relations and aspiration of Ukraine towards the EU membership have always been under the particular interest of scholars, policy-makers and civil society. Through years of Ukraine's independence youth has been defined as a key target audience for the public policy, hence it is critically important to understand their opinions and attitudes, positions, and perceptions. As unprecedented a challenge as COVID-19 pandemics turned out to be for European solidarity and values could not but affect the attitudes to the EU and European integration in Ukraine. The purpose of this study is to identify any possible transformations the concept of EU and European solidarity occurred in the minds of Ukraine's undoubtedly most pro-European social group (student youth aged 18–25). The survey was held by Ukrainian Association of Professors and Researchers of European Integration through March–May 2020, under the turbulent first months of pandemics at the very height of quarantine limitations in both the EU and Ukraine. By means of content analysis, concept analysis and categorization of unique empirical data collected within the frames of the all-Ukrainian student essay contest focused on COVID-19 impact upon European integration and solidarity, this study traces shifts in Ukrainian students' attitudes to the EU and Ukraine's European integration process and, where possible, identifies the types of media discourse and sources influencing the target group's opinions.

Key words: the EU, European integration, European solidarity, Ukrainian university students, COVID-19 pandemics.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic had a great impact on the general perception of the EU both inside and outside the European Union. While within the EU, the public opinion on the EU were closely monitored throughout the first shocking wave of pandemics *(Eurobarometer, 2020)*, with special attention paid to financial solidarity *(Bobzien, Kalleitner, 2020)*, immigration issues *(Dannison, Geddes, 2020)* or social divisions *(Crastev, Leonard, 2021)*, the COVID-19 impact upon the ENP countries' attitudes to the EU has rarely become a subject of public attention.

Out of all the ENP countries, Ukraine stands out as a specific case, as the nation's unanimous response to the Russian full-scale military aggression has once again highlighted not only civilizational, but also an existential background behind Ukraine's European choice. With a challenge as crucial as war in view, it seems highly relevant to look backwards to the Ukrainians' assessment of the EU efficiency under the COVID-19 pandemics as a crush test for the nation's pro-European allegiances.

As one of the core concepts of the national social and political discourse *(Yavorska, 2013),* and, by the same token, as a concept directly referring to a social standards and values set *(Yehorova, Prokopenko, Popova, 2019),* the Ukraine's pro-European choice is largely determined by the undergoing social transformations. In Ukrainian context, a solitary attempt at outlining the changes in Ukraine's perception of the EU under COVID-19 was done by a group of *Ukrainian Prism* experts *(Vdovychenko, Vorotniuk, Herasymchuk, Koval, Krayev, 2020).* However, their primary goal was to develop a set of context-determined recommendations rather than to investigate the shifts in public attitudes to the idea of European integration or to the EU as a whole.

Valuable insights as for Ukrainians' level of support for accession to the European Union can be driven out of International Republican Institute's regular public opinion survey of residents of Ukraine (2021) conducted through March 13–21, 2021. Still, their data set presents a somewhat delayed response to the outburst of the pandemics, with many of the initial reactions possibly reconsidered with time.

The Ukrainian society's immediate response to pandemics was grasped by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology's CATI opinion poll of March 27–30, 2020 *(Public Authorities' Efficiency Assessment and Public Reaction to the Coronavirus Pandemics, 2020).* Yet, it addresses the matter of Ukraine's European perspective under COVID-19 but briefly.

2. Research focus

This study aims at tracing any possible shifts of meaning the concept of the EU, as perceived by Ukrainian student youth (age group 18–25), had acquired under the direct and mediated influence of media discourse around the COVID-19 pandemic and the EU's reactions to it.

This research is focused specifically on Ukrainian student youth as one of the Ukrainian society's most proactive groups in the ongoing struggle against the Russian aggression. According to the State Statistics Service of Ukraine, about 6.2 million people aged 10–24 lived in Ukraine as of January 1, 2018 (the youth from occupied territories not included), which makes them an influential group of stakeholders in Ukrainian internal and external political process. From the Granite Revolution of 1990 to the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, Ukrainian youth have proved their ability to "envision, demand, and be active contributors and transformers to a more just and equitable world" *(UN Report 2019 State of Youth in Ukraine),* Ukraine's future in the EU being the essential part of it.

The research questions under consideration comprise a) determining the key attributes of the EU concept as perceived by the target group before and after the COVID-19 pandemics outbreak; b) tracking down the possible change in the target group's attitude to the EU caused by the EU immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemics outbreak; c) marking any possible correlation between the subject's profile (gender, region, field of study) and their attitude to the EU.

3. Methods

*Samples.*The core empirical data for the study comes from the open Pan-Ukrainian student essay contest held by Ukrainian Association of Professors and Researchers of European Integration (APREI, aprei.com.ua) through March–May 2020, at the very height of quarantine limitations in both the EU and Ukraine. Each of the participants (177 in total) submitted a 1000-word essay on how the pandemic might affect Ukraine's European integration and the very concept of European solidarity.

Region-wise, 62 essays were acquired from the central part of the country, 38 from the western part and 77 from the south-eastern region, with HEIs from Kharkiv, Kyiv, Poltava and Lviv as the most active participants. Gender-wise, 133 out of 177 essays were submitted by females, which reflects the gender-biased background of Ukrainian higher education positioning Humanities and Social Sciences as predominantly "female" fields of study *(Tsarenko, 2015)*. Subject-wise, 25 essays came from the departments of Law, 144 from Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, 8 from Natural and Exact Sciences (Medicine included), which reveals a considerable gap in bringing the EU studies and EU related issues into a focus at Natural and Exact Sciences departments.

Coding. To identify the TA's attitude to the EU, the method of content analysis as defined by Holsti (1969) was applied to the empirical data. A coding list of variables was constructed as described below, by category:

– *EU member states visibility and efficiency assessment,* based on the number of countries mentioned, the mentioning rate (quantitative analysis) and the attitude towards the EU's response to the pandemics (1 – positive, 0 – neutral/not defined, -1 – negative).

– *General mood of the essay* (1 – optimistic, 0 – mixed, -1 – pessimistic).

– *Author's general attitude to the EU* (1 – positive, 0 – mixed or hard to define, -1 – negative).

– *Background for reasoning over the EU's response to COVID-19 challenges:* references to verified sources (1 – present, 0 – absent, with a range of sources to be defined and categorized), references to non-verifiable sources, such as social media (1- present, 0 – absent), references to personal experience (1 – present, 0 – absent), emotional reasoning (1 – present, 0 – absent).

– *Inclusion/exclusion.* The feeling of belonging to the common European space and sharing European identity, often conveyed through a metaphor of Europe as a home, a house or a living space. Semantic fields of ownership, belonging, co-living, sharing, integration were coded (1 – confirmed, 0 – absent, -1 – denied).

To secure the rating reliability, the essays were independently coded by both co-authors and a graduate student trained in the use of the coding scheme. The average percentage of agreement for the coded variables was 89%, Cohen's kappa for agreement ranging from.78 to perfect agreement.

4. Research findings

Throughout the years, as demonstrated by several nationwide polls *("Ukrainian Society and European Values" by Gorshenin Institute, 2018; "Ukrainian Generation Z: Values and Waymarks" by New Europe Center, 2018; "European Integration of Ukraine: Human Dimension" by Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, Razumkov Center, Research and Branding Group, 2011–2017)* young people were considered the most pro-European part of the

Ukrainian society. As of 2017, 60% of Ukrainian youth (age group 14–29) prioritized the EU over Ukraine in every single indicator of political and personal freedom, economic prosperity, living standards, state and personal safety, equal opportunities, and compliance with law. Taken at the peak of Euro-optimistic moods raised by the Revolution of Dignity and further boosted by the introduction of visa-free regime with the EU in 2017, those polls, however, did not reflect the possible shifts in Ukrainian youth visions of the EU caused by the upcoming events (the crucial President Elections of 2019; the Brexit crisis; and, most of all, by the COVID-19 pandemics).

The mind-map of the EU as envisioned by the Ukrainian students covers predominantly the flagships of the EU economy. Out of 27 member states, only Germany (45 mentions), France (37), Spain (28), Poland (13) and Italy (54) are mentioned more than ten times, with Poland being frequently mentioned as Ukraine's closest neighbor and, as such, perceived as Ukraine's 'Jungian Other'. Countries like Czech Republic, Austria, the Netherlands, and Greece score 4 to 5 mentions, while the rest of the countries are mentioned 3 times or less (Portugal, Albania, Belgium, Romania) or not mentioned at all (the rest of the member states). Out of the whole EU, only Germany (2), Austria (1) and France (1) are mentioned as the countries successfully dealing with the pandemics outbreak, while Italy is mentioned 6 times as a sample of inefficiency and 12 times – as a sample of people's solidarity as opposed to the government's failures. Outside EU, the countries praised for their swift and effective response to the pandemics include China (4), South Korea (3), Japan (1) and Taiwan (1).

All in all, the EU's efficiency assessment in dealing with COVID-19 is predominantly negative, with *"slow"* (54), *"ineffective"* (41), *"belated"* (38)*, "weak"* (35)*, "bureaucratic"* (32)*, "incapable"* (27) and *"passive"* (22) as the most frequent adjectives applied to define it.

In terms of *general mood*, as assessed independently by the reviewers, optimistic attitude (98 = 55%) prevails over the mixed one (70 = 39,5%), with roughly 50% of males (24 out of 44) and females (69 out of 133) sharing an optimistic perspective on the COVID-19 pandemics outcomes. Region-wise, optimistic moods prevail in 51% of works coming from South-Eastern regions (40 out of 77), in 60,5% of works coming from Western regions (32 out of 38) and in 56% of works coming from Central Ukrainian regions. Remarkably, out of 9 essays expressing overtly pessimistic attitude, 4 were submitted by male authors, all of them from South-Eastern regions. The reasons for optimism range from philosophical reflections (*"All in all, it's just another stage in Western civilization's development"*) and technological advancements (*"What gives us hope is… high level of health care and technologies, the coordination of efforts in dealing with emergencies"*) to the proclamations of isolationism: *"We don't need idols and don't need to copy anyone, we are the nation strong in mind and body and capable of winning through"*.

As far as the *general attitude to the EU* is concerned, 39% of essays (69 works, 50 by females, 19 by males) express a strongly positive attitude, with only 2 works demonstrating an overtly negative attitude. Shades of negative attitude were spotted in 21% of essays (37 works, 27 by females, 10 by males). Mixed or hard to define attitude was expressed in 40% of essays (71 works in total), demonstrating a considerable overlap with the group sharing mixed attitude towards the situation in general.

Region-wise, positive attitude to the EU is shared by 45% (35 out of 77) of the authors from the East and South Ukraine, 39% (15 out of 38) of those from the Western regions, and 35% (22 out of 62) of those from Central Ukraine. Negative attitude is expressed by 21% (16 out of 77) of participants from South and East Ukraine, 24% (9 out of 38) of participants from the West, and 19% (12 out of 62) of participants from the Central Ukraine.

Gender-wise, male participants seem to be more positive in their attitudes to the EU. 43% of males (as opposed to 37,5% of females) share positive vision of the EU, while the negative attitude is shared by 23% of male and 20% of female participants respectively.

Remarkably, the background for positive attitude towards the EU is largely determined not so much by the EU's economical or technological superiority, but by the concepts of European values and European solidarity, perceived as a *"guarantee for global peace and development"*: *"Despite the quarantine measures separating people from each other, the European integration gets only stronger, for the countries unite to fight the common enemy"*; *"although at first the pandemic caused panic and isolation, now it's obvious that the EU population has become united as never before"*; *"The whole Europe understands the importance of integration and mutual help. But what speaks better than words is human behavior. We can see people singing national Italian songs on their balconies. We can see Spaniards celebrating birthdays online. They are united more than ever"; "Now everyone is trying to help the medical staff and to follow the quarantine regulations. It is through this behavior that Europe demonstrates its integrity and holds on to European values"; "the European nations will live through this new plague all together – and this is how their humanity, their European values work".* Such an approach contrasts strikingly with the attitudes inside the EU, where almost six out of ten EU respondents were dissatisfied with the solidarity shown between EU Member States during the first months of the pandemic.

The negative attitude to the EU, in its turn, is shaped by the recurrent motive of disillusionment (*"however, it's quite obvious that those great ideas of solidarity can evaporate and disappear in the face of real danger"; "as the current situation has shown, there is no such thing as European solidarity – it's merely an ideological wrap easily ripped off"*) and well-worn narrative of the European civilization as "weak", fragmented and "spoiled" by high living standards *(Lipman, 2015)*. What was once seen as a civilizational advantage is now reconsidered as a potential weakness: *"The Europeans got used to living relaxedly, knowing of their economic stability, well-developed health care system, social security and complete trust to the authorities and the police. Maybe this is what ruined them after all"; "And so, the Europeans got whatever they struggled for, all the human values they fought for, and now they take that for granted. A new era of individualism followed: a social network instead of family, psychologist instead of a friend, sex instead of love, hundreds of TV channels instead of real communication"*. Some of the negativistic statements from 2020 clearly resonate with the current Russian propaganda discourse: "*While some countries, such as Ukraine, kept losing their people to wars, the pampered societies pretended that was not their business, for their membership in EU and NATO grants them from losing human lives. They tried hard to dissociate from other countries, keeping their "gold" for themselves: Brexit, severe visa regulations for some countries etc.*".

The Ukrainian students' *background for reasoning over the EU actions* is largely determined by social media, with references to viral videos spotted in 1/4 of the works. Over 30% of essays (mostly those with the negative attitude) demonstrate an oversimplified, emotionally charged assessment of the processes taking place in the EU as a response to COVID-19 pandemics, with the metaphorical models of fights, quarrels, betrayal, and rivalry often applied to describe the current relationship between the EU member states (i.e. *"While Italy begged for help, the European Union merely expressed disquiet, and the member countries simply ignored all calls for help"; "What is even worse, the countries that used to be friends have turned into enemies, as they say, "homo homini lupus est"…*). In terms of personal experience with the EU, only 3 out of 177 contestants mentioned their visiting the EU as tourists or Erasmus program

participants, which could be explained by the fact that, as of 2019, 76% of young Ukrainians had never been abroad (New Europe Centre).

Contrary to the EU, where 33% of population demonstrated sufficient knowledge of the initiatives undertaken by the EU to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis, less than 15% of the contestants (most of them coming from the field of Law and Social Studies) referred to the exact measures when arguing their point of view. Among the later, the various communiques on financial support for Ukraine were mentioned 17 times; the EC and EIF's support measures for SMEs and SPEs were mentioned 4 times; the establishment of COVID-19 Education Response Committee was mentioned 3 times; the SURE and rescEU programs were mentioned 2 times each; the EFPA's COVID-19 guidelines and trainings for psychologists and the ERA agreement and joint efforts in anti-COVID vaccine development were mentioned 1 time each; the financial support to World Health Organization announced by Josep Borrell Fontelles and perceived as *"an act of global solidarity, a chance for the New Europe's success as a democratic, free and tolerant union… and, hence that, a chance for my country, too"* was mentioned once.

The feeling of *inclusion*, interpreted as belonging, ownership and common identity, is shared by 59% participants (60% of contestants from the East and South, 66% from the West, 53% from Central Ukraine). Only 2 contestants (both from the Western region) have explicitly denied their inclusion into the common European space. However, considerable number of participants feel their inclusion is endangered by the introduction of quarantine measures: *"The pillars supporting the European Union – free movement of people and goods – were ruining right in front of our eyes, when the countries started closing their borders one by one"*. The border closure is often perceived as a direct attack at the very essence of the EU, *"the end of what has been done for European integration in last 30 years"*: *"we all witnessed the EU countries closing their borders and isolating themselves from the rest thus forgetting about the existence of European Economic Area between the EU member countries"; "The countries have closed their national borders, even Germany, the driver of European integration, has introduced regulations. But free transfer of people and goods was not introduced just for the good times"*.

For the young Ukrainians, whose pro-European sympathies have been largely boosted by the introduction of visa-free entry to the EU, the border closure directly affects their sense of belonging, making them feel marginalized once again: *"Judging from certain factors, one can assume that only people from the countries with European level of health care would be allowed to travel through Europe"; "Let's not forget the incident with the Ukrainian migrant workers shown the door in Slovenia and left to their fates"*. Under such circumstances, the well-established metaphor of European Union as common "European home" for all the member states is subject to reconsideration: *"…the countries that year by year progressed on their way to mutual understanding, economic development, prosperity and European solidarity… are now closing the borders and the doors of their homes"; "Right now the countries suffering from economic turbulence are making their choice between "state egoism", protectionism and the values of their common European home"*.

5. Conclusions

The first months of COVID-19 pandemic, with its atmosphere of total uncertainty and panic, caused the shift in Ukrainian youth's attitudes to the EU from predominantly positive to predominantly mixed or hard to define. The pandemic urged the Ukrainian students to critically reconsider almost all the EU-related positive stereotypes used to determine the vision of Europe in Ukraine's political, social, and cultural discourse, such as Europe's ultimate cultural and

moral superiority, Europe as a paragon of values and as a model sample, Europe as a wise mentor, Europe as an epitome of rationality, effectiveness and progress *(Yavorska, 2013)*. On the other hand, due to the obvious performance gap in critical thinking skills development and the EU's but partial visibility in Ukraine's media discourse, the complexity of students' perception of the EU was largely undermined by emotional manipulations applied by social media.

Contrary to the expectations, no considerable correlation between the subjects' profile (gender and region) and their attitude to the EU has been determined. As opposed to the other social groups, Ukraine's student youth proved to be not so much influenced by gender stereotypes or regional context. However, the current sample does not allow to trace any possible correlations as far as the field of study is concerned. At the same time, the low number of participants from the fields of Natural and Exact Sciences can signify both the lack of European focus in the Natural and Exact Sciences curricula and the lack of students' awareness of and interest in Ukraine's European prospects.

Both the EU citizens and the Ukrainian students agree that the EU should have more competences to deal with crises such as the Coronavirus pandemic and want a stronger role for the EU in fighting this crisis. At the same time, contrary to the EU-based polls, the majority of Ukrainian students tie their hopes for successful resolution of the COVID-19 crisis to the ideas of European solidarity, European values, and European integration.

All in all, COVID-19 pandemic and the EU's response to it could be perceived as a crush test for Ukrainian students' pro-European allegiances. On the one hand, it complicated their vision of the EU and made them abandon illusions of European integration as a universal panacea by exposing the EU's inner controversies and diverse political landscape. On the other hand, by stressing the common hardships and levelling up Ukraine's and EU's positions in fighting a common enemy, it gave Ukraine's aspirations for European integration a clearly realistic perspective.

Data Availability.
https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/hc99cmfgym/1

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