Abstract

This article reflects on the issue of legitimacy and attitudes of the young generation (16–19 years old) towards the European integration. The authors decided to divide the text into two parts, the first of which consists of the theoretical and historical approach to the problem of the legitimacy of European integration and the narrative about Europe, and the second presents the main conclusions and problems identified during the work of authors with the youth, and the implementation of the international Jean Monnet Network project *MoreEU: More Europe to overcome the crisis*. Confrontation of these two parts has made it clear that traditional justification of the legitimacy of the integration project does not speak to the contemporary youth, and that this is precisely in this age group that we can clearly see the crisis of the legitimacy of the European Union.

Keywords: narrative about Europe, problem of legitimisation of the European integration, social reception of the European Union, youth in the debate on the future of the European Union

Czyja opowieść o Europie? Wokół problemu akceptacji i legitymizacji projektu europejskiego w oczach młodych obywateli

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi refleksję o problemie legitymizacji i postawach młodego pokolenia (16–19 lat) do integracji europejskiej. Autorzy zdecydowali się na podział tekstu na dwie części, z których pierwsza stanowi teoretyczne i historyczne ujęcie problemu legitymizacji integracji europejskiej oraz narracji (opowieści) o Europie, zaś w drugiej przedstawiono główne wnioski i problemy zidentyfikowane podczas pracy autorów z młodzieżą oraz realizacji międzynarodowego projektu w ramach Jean Monnet Network *MoreEU: More Europe to overcome the crisis*. Skonfrontowanie tych dwóch części pozwoliło wskazać, iż do współczesnej młodzieży nie przemawiają tradycyjne uzasadnienia zasadności projektu integracyjnego, co więcej właśnie w tej grupie wiekowej jest dość wyraźnie widoczny kryzys legitymizacji Unii Europejskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: narracja o Europie, problem legitymizacji integracji europejskiej, społeczny odbiór Unii Europejskiej, młodzież w debacie o przyszłości Unii Europejskiej

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Whose story about Europe? The problem of acceptance and legitimisation of the European project in the eyes of young people[1]

This text presents observations of the staff of the Institute of European Studies with experience in working with secondary-level young people and those participating in the European Awareness Day debate involving more than 500 young people aged 16 to 19 on the issue of legitimisation of the European project. The authors do not consider the following reflections to be equivalent to empirical and systematic sociological research on a large sample, but given their experience as high school teachers and long-standing academic lecturers, they have decided to build a voice in the debate on the relationship of the young generation to the integration process and its knowledge about it.

The authors decided to confront two views on narrative and legitimisation of integration processes in Europe after World War II. The first part of the paper presents a theoretical conception of a narrative of a united Europe, while taking into account its evolution in the public debate. Against this background, as in the framework of traditional perception of integration processes, the second part draws on the experiences of the project conducted by the Institute of European Studies and the didactic work of the authors to demonstrate the significant change that has taken place in the perception and evaluation of the young generation.

The story of united Europe

The European continent project is being implemented in a number of ways (also plunging into crisis on many levels). The most obvious manifestation is reflected by the structures and political institutions that are responsible for making decisions and which are unambiguously associated with "Europe" or "Brussels" – the European Commission, the Parliament or the European Council. An important aspect of the implementation of integration processes is the creation of legal norms, starting with the Treaties, through a series of acts that create the EU legal autonomous order. The principles of direct effect and primacy of the Community law have made the legal manifestations of the unification process affect potentially every citizen. The single market and the freedom of movement are equally present. The narrative – the story of united Europe, which presents integration as a natural state, historical necessity, vocation, inevitable destiny, optimal state of affairs – is less obvious but also important in terms of building and presenting the unity. The essence of political narratives is to make sense of action, to put it into a broader context, thereby legitimising it as part of the path to the desired state. It is the story of a common Europe that creates the framework for consciousness for concrete political action. Narrative in itself defines not only the place of a given community in the world as well as its vocation and nature, but also determines what is and is not beneficial to it, and finally it indicates what should be considered worthy, desirable, noble, consistent with nature or divine purpose. As the expression of the self--consciousness of the community, it is also the basis of creating the identity beyond the individual one – participation in the common story is an element of building *Gemeinschaft* relationships. Narration is also a powerful tool that can invalidate or overshadow some policy options while highlighting others.

Narration is the product of human minds, projection of images of what is right, desirable and noble. Narratives have existed since the creation of political communities – after all, defining yourself as civilised or enlightened, while defining others as barbarians is nothing else but matching groups into a particular story. They do not have to be created deliberately, but they can be a tool in competition. Raymond Aron wrote more than 50 years ago that states were waging war not only on territory, but also on "souls" (*aimes*) although a better translation of the essence of his view would be "minds." The US crisis associated with the war in Vietnam was so deep because it questioned the basic American story of the homeland of freedom fostering it all over the world and standing always on the good side. Ronald Reagan's theorem on the existence of an "evil

empire" was an act of restoration of a story while the victory in the Cold War credited a belief in the truth of Western narrative. Also, the success of integration, both in terms of political (peace-keeping) and economic policies, has credited the narrative on the validity of the choice made 60 years ago that was the only meaningful one. Taking into consideration that Europe would not survive another war and the war could not have been avoided without the creation of transnational structures and the recognition that all disputes would be resolved by negotiations under the watchful eye of the authorities, the accession to the story of united Europe was the only decision worthy of rational Europeans. Numerous disputes over the shape of the Communities (later of the Union), relations between the transnational and intergovernmental aspects, the federal and confederal components were placed in the framework of a peculiar paradigm that was accepted by almost the entire political class of Western Europe – problems are solved and difficulties are overcome jointly by persistent negotiations and their effect can only lead to a deeper integration. In other words, always more Europe, alternatively just as much, because less will not solve anything.

Looking at Jean Monnet's plans and views, it should be noted that his ideas on the institutional shape or market rules have not been implemented, but the French have definitely won as far as the narrative is concerned. John Gillingham writes that as part of Monnet's accomplishments that have survived and succeeded – what cannot be said about ECSC or EWO – there is a set of notions that entered into the political discourse and that we have used to date, even denying integration (Gillingham 2003: p. 73–74). Categories such as supranationality (*supranationalité*), community, European federation, sovereignty assignment, sectorial integration derive directly from it, both as descriptive concepts of the language and real phenomena initiated by its influence. The logic of the first Commission President, Walter Hallstein, was the same as the logic of the "story of Europe". François Furet (1999) argued that the greatest power of communist ideology was to instil in the public, including even its opponents, the belief in inevitable victory. The missionary integration of the European Commission presented in its subsequent incarnations has operated a similar language, pointing to the naturalness, the inevitability and the self-righteousness of the proposed solutions. It was part of building a progressive camp responding better to challenges of the modern world (see: Borkowski 2013).

For many years, the story of Europe was a compulsory element of political views, thus common for the whole political class and even the intellectual elite, it could not be attributed to a particular party. In this sense, the postulate of Altiero Spinelli, who

claimed at the end of World War II, that the movement for the unification of the continent had to be transcendent and inclusive (Castaldi 2009: p. 316–320), was fulfilled. This ensured a lasting commitment of the states to the project, regardless of the current changes of government or party alliances. The success of the project – the benefits were visible both in statistics as well as for private entities (individuals and enterprises) – confirmed the conviction about the rightness of the adopted path. Difficulties were always present, periods of inertia and "sclerosis"[2] occurred, but the story was doing well. This feature has had far-reaching consequences – attachment to the European project has become one of the characteristics of the establishment as a whole (Majone 2009: p. 30–39). In the case of rebellion against the establishment, the story has also become the target of attack, regardless of the ideological vector of its execution. What is important, next to the benefits, the costs occurred as well. As Giandomenico Majone writes, "for half a century Euroelites could present integration as a positive-sum game. Now everybody can see that surrendering monetary sovereignty and losing control of the national borders entail costs as well as benefits. This realisation is bound to induce greater popular resistance to future transfers of powers to the European level" (Majone 2009: p. 44).

Europe – in the sense of building closer relations between peoples and states – is not only a remedy for deficiencies recognised in the past full of disputes, which were considered to be particularly troublesome or had proven negative potential. It also means a new quality and a kind of purification surrendering to which will guarantee that the future will be better. Talking about Europe, we do not refer to what really exists but what should exist and happen (Bottici, Challand 2013: p. 107–108). Europe is primarily a remedy for nationalism and related political demands, especially the desire to build the position and wealth of one nation at the expense of the other, presented as a necessity and a morally correct path. It is worth emphasising that such thinking is justified by the liberal belief that relations between states can be positive-sum games, i.e. in a concrete relationship all participants gain. Changing the logic of competition to the

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[2]   The term came into widespread use in the late 1970s as the identification of the crisis of European integration after the defeat of the monetary union project, when there was no prospect and it was generally thought that Europe was simply "drifting." As Karl Kaiser wrote: "The existence of the European Community is seriously threatened. Unlike the previous decade, the position of the Western Europe seems to be attacked on each side. If nothing is done, then we will have to face the disintegration of the most important European accomplishments since the Second World War" (Kaiser et al. 1983: p. 1). As far as the economic system is concerned, the term was affirmed by Herbert Giersch, pointing to the over-regulation of the economy which results in high unemployment (Giersch 1985).

logic of cooperation bear fruit in ipso facto, although the distribution of benefits is an open matter and the question on how much each participant in the joint project has got needs to be discussed.

The story of Europe has also fallen in some ways a victim of its own success. We all believed in righteousness and the power to choose the way of integration so much that at the same time it was considered an almost universal remedy. It is easy to symbolically shift the responsibility on it as in the act of a specific faith – Europe will do something about it, although it is not currently dealing with it. So faith does not necessarily come from experiential or empirical evidence of the efficacy and effectiveness of European structures, but from the very existence of them and the attribution to them in collective imagination the power to do what the government and state power have not been able to cope with. This belief could be found e.g. in the circles of ecological activists pointing out that Poland's entry into the EU would mean that the external impulse would eventually lead to the respect of certain standards, recycling would become widespread, and trash would not be exported to the forests. Recognising the Union as a tool to take responsibility from us results in excessive expectations that cannot be fulfilled, not because of bad will or failure, but generally as a consequence of the assumptions. You can point to analogies from other areas of social life – we often hear the question of why the school does not raise, although it should, and politicians have drawn a beautiful picture of the ideal graduate. So why the Union has not solved the problem of youth unemployment, low pensions and dirty streets – after all, it is created for it, this is why we bear its presence and recognise it as an entity that has the right to interfere in our lives. Institution as a means of building the ideal community – a measure so good that the product of its impact will be a better world. It was once a national state, then this role was attributed to the Communities, today to the Union. "It certainly promised – otherwise we would not have entrusted our affairs to it," this view can be considered symbolic. Disbelieved faith is an important factor that must be taken into account even by the most strongly rooted political forces.

Today, we are facing the overlap of two phenomena: the rebellion against the elites and the inability of Europe as a body of institutions. The elites have proved unable to lead in difficult times (or at least are considered as such by many societies) and at the same time unable to excite in the mass society of the constant network communication the belief that reality is complex. On the contrary, we have received the conviction that the complexity of the world, including political relations, and thus the uncertainty as to the possibilities and actual results of the actions undertaken, is pure fiction, the tool

of maintaining the elite position, the false information passed to "ordinary people." A fragment of discussion about the consequences of Brexit, in which the supporter confronted with negative expert opinion, stated that the Titanic had also been built by experts may be an example of such an almost anecdotal thinking[3]. The slogan that "we have enough of experts" (Michael Gove's guide 2016), those who stubbornly claim that things are not as simple as radical politicians would like them to be and that you cannot clearly identify the one to blame, has become an important element of building by the supporters of the exit from the EU the belief that they represent the citizens. Undermining the belief in the meaning and cost-effectiveness of the integration project is one of the elements of the rebellion against the elites. This is facilitated by the fact that the multi-level reality of the EU, with many institutions involved in the complex system of "check and balance" both on horizontal and vertical grounds, is really complex and difficult to understand by a layman.

"Europe" is not only complicated but also incapable of counteracting negative phenomena in the sphere of economy and security affecting its citizens. The post-war "golden times" of rapid economic growth, virtually non-existent unemployment and declining social inequality ended with oil crises and the dollar-gold system in the early 1970s. and despite the solution of the aforementioned problems by the West, they have never returned (see Hobsbawm 1999: 241–268, 349 et seq.). The more and more bureaucratic and competing "Europe" did not prevent deindustrialisation and relocation of production to Asia, it made the labour market and the flow of capital more flexible, which caused unequal distribution of the benefits of economic liberalisation; it did not predict and thus fell victim to the financial crisis that began in the United States an threatened the common currency on the Old Continent. Europe created subsequent austerity measures, which was noticed by all – Greeks protesting against cost saving burned Angela Merkel's dagger as a symbol of EU dictation. The fact that it was neither the EU nor its recommendations that led to the enormous debt of the European states, that, in fact, it only tried to prevent it and was disregarded by national governments, does not matter in the sense that it did not become part of the dominant story.

By creating an area of free circulation without internal borders, the EU has hindered/complicated the effective provision of internal security, which, combined with the radicalisation of some Islamic groups and the crisis in the Middle East, including the civil war in Syria (the EU has not had a significant impact on either of these factors),

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[3]   "The ark was built by amateurs, but professionals built the Titanic" – the phrase was used for the first time in 1979.

has led to increased sense of danger by terrorism and difficult to control migratory waves. All this together made the story of the united Europe not only start to weaken under the pressure of reality but also attacked as "their" narrative, and "they" are directly responsible for the difficult social situation and growing uncertainty.

The claim that the recognition of integration processes as a necessary element of European reality is part of the false story of European elites calculated by them to stay in power at the expense of, inter alia, binding or laughing at the "national spirit", whatever it may be, entered the canon of populist ideology in the beginning of the 21st century. Examples of this in a concentrated form can be found on the Anti-European Team Alliance web site (TEAM WWW). It is also worth quoting Neil Farage's statement, "What tomorrow is about is taking back our country and becoming an independent, normal nation" (Farage Tells Breitbart 2016). Recovering the state from foreign hands (expatriates and Brussels officials) was also announced Marine Le Pen, the candidate of the National Front in the presidential election in France in the spring of 2017. These voices meet with a favourable response related to the deteriorating level of living and many social problems. Due to the dramatic unemployment of young Europeans (over 40% in some EU countries), this social group is susceptible to a political program questioning the status quo in toto both for subjective (natural for this group) and objective reasons. Recognising the story of Europe as one more "trick" to justify the impossibility of change, and thus also the petrification of current elites, results in the delegation of the European project.

It should be emphasised that the image of European societies is not clear at this point. The results of the UK referendum on 26 June 2016 show that the majority of young people voted for remaining in the EU – 73% in the 18–24 age group, 62% in the 25–34 (*EU referendum* 2016). At the same time, in many countries, including Poland, there is a clear tendency for young people to turn to right-wing and extreme right-wing parties that appeal to national ideology and blame European institutions for imposing foreign insights and destroying the national narrative spirit. While the phenomenon that can be termed an ideological sinusoid is not something weird or threatening (Bader Ginsburg 2017), the belief that the return to particularism and nationalisation of politics is a remedy for the troubles of progressive globalisation and will increase the real possibilities for influencing international relations of European countries is not only untrue, but also dangerous in terms of aggravating global competition. Hence the search for the answer to the questions about who the young people attribute the pro-integration narrative to – the story of a unified united Europe, why and for what reasons they reject

it and whether they base their reflection on rational premises is important not only from a sociologist's point of view, but also for every researcher conscious of the challenges of today's Europe, which Poland is a part of. In the rest of this article, the authors will try to answer this question, using the experience gained while working with high school students.

Voices of the young generation in the debate on European integration

As part of the project *MoreEU: More Europe to overcome the crisis* the Institute of European Studies of the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies of the University of Warsaw has chosen the problem of legitimacy as the central point of its contribution. Apart from scientific research, there was also a public debate with young people (23 September 2016) – high school pupils graduates (16–19 years old), mainly from Mazovia (Warsaw, Łowicz, Otwock, Mińsk Mazowiecki, Siedlce), but also from Kielce, altogether over 500 people. It took place directly after a staging of a musical – a story of the unity of Europe and its building after World War II (*Europa: che Passione!* WWW). The debate moderated by the researchers of the Institute had three main themes: fulfilled and unfulfilled promises of Europe; can the history of unity be our (participants') history?; can Poland, on the British model, quit this story and replace it with another one. The organisers assumed the fullest involvement of the youth, the emphasis being put on the discussion between representatives of pupils rather than between participants and researchers. The voices of the researchers were explanatory and identified questions, issues and challenges for Europe.

Functioning in the conditions of Poland's membership in the European Union causes a fundamental problem for young people with answering the first question asked by the researchers about the promises of European integration. Peace, prosperity, security, catching up with socio-economic arrears, membership in an elite European club constitute an obvious answer rather for the generation of 25+ and the elders. However, it was difficult for high school students – only after a while did the concept of European unity appear, but for many it was of pejorative importance as a synonym of absolute unification (legal, economic, cultural, etc.). What is important, the notion of European unity is for the youth far from being indisputable – it was presented as an empty slogan which, in principle, is hard to explain and translate into a program of political ac-

tion, as a mandate of absolute unification, as a call for joint action to achieve common goals and as a method of achieving them. Identifying elements of European integration that are valuable to the average European is not easy – tables with information on co-financing refurbishment or construction of the facility from EU funds, travelling without a passport or possibility to study in another country basically exhausts the list of formulated ideas.

An interesting paradox has emerged in a number of commentaries: an alternative Europe is the one that will preserve some of the achievements of European integration (elements of the common market, Europe without borders, Erasmus+), but at the same time it significantly reduces or eliminates interference with Member States, legal regulations and institutions. Another simplification allows the young people to think that these components of European integration can function without regulatory mechanisms (legal regulations) and the bodies responsible for them (institutions). In addition, while there is an awareness of the need for major changes in the functioning of the European Union, it is not entirely clear what direction they should follow. There is, however, a consensus that the exit from the EU is meaningless and would result in more losses than benefits.

In the context of the question of legitimacy of the European Union, the most important element of young people's commentaries is the complete empowerment of the European Union – "Union does", "Union imposes", "Union intervenes", "Union strives to"... Seemingly, this is another example of the simplification (usual mindset), which will be mentioned in the next part. This, however, is a deeper problem, i.e. lack of understanding for the fact that Member States are behind the EU – they make key decisions and participate in the decision-making process. If the role of the distinct Member States appears, it is most likely to be one of a victim unable to oppose the EU or, very specifically, Germany seeking hegemony, a "brave" Britain who has decided to leave the EU or France, whose economic power cannot develop because of the expansion of German companies. In turn, the clarification that Member States are proposing candidates for the Commissioners and that the democratically elected European Parliament approves the composition of the European Commission is not convincing – the EC does not have sufficient authority to take decisions. Another example: during the debate, one of the students asked why the European Union was not working to strengthen Europe's defence and why it did not care about its security, while it is quite obvious for the researchers in European studies that the Member States had not agreed to the development of this component. Thus, there appears the phenomenon of total separa-

tion in the narrative layer of the EU from its Member States, as if the European integration was not their work and the outcome of their decision, and the Union itself was an autonomous independent entity capable of making independent decisions, most often against Member States (as in the case of refugees). It is rather puzzling to what extent the concept of legitimisation of indirect European integration defined by theoreticians is confirmed in reality.

The course of the debate allowed us to draw some conclusions that are preliminary and do not pretend to be an alternative to empirical research in a sufficiently large sample. They can be summarised as follows:

1. Youth have a simplified picture of the European Union and its institutions, regardless of their view of the subject, and they are eager to say it – it is natural on the other hand, on the other it shows that the belief that the world is simple and can be explained with simple passwords and prescriptions is strongly embedded.

2. Current media coverage, focusing on the selected aspect of the EU crisis – during the debate on the issue of Middle Eastern refugees – partly veils a broader sense of integration but does not do so in its entirety.

3. The debate was respectful of any culture of expression and could be an example for television programs involving invited politicians.

4. The spectrum of views is very diverse – there is a clear lack of dominant narrative. The dispute is broadly defined and has existential character – it does not address the details of institutional arrangements, but the very meaning of the process of integration and participation in it.

5. A visible group of young people is ready to risk leaving the integration structures.

Contemporary schoolchildren, like every generation, are characterized by a different perception of the world. Perception resulting, among others, from the fact that since the childhood they have been living in the world of the Internet, social media, globalisation, and, what is especially important for the present discussion, in Poland in the EU. The justification for defending the European integration process presented by older generations, referring to the world of visas, border controls, mobility constraints, problems of multiple jurisdictions, East-West divisions is therefore dysfunctional. Hence, a completely different approach of young people to the debate about the European Union and the future of Europe.

We must also note that young people spend a lot of time in "virtual reality". Hence, in the context of the "narrative of the EU", it is much easier to "program" in them a stra-

ightforward, linear way of thinking. The young people often get to know the world through social media and there is no in-depth discussion there; this does not refer to shaping certain attitudes, but about the ability to defend the attitudes that exist by referring to facts. At the same time, we should keep in mind that uninterrupted Internet access allows for faster access to information and therefore it is easier to contest reality. The youth are characterised by the feeling of uncertainty, dynamics, liquidity. This brings the ease of rejecting the so-called political correctness and existing structures. On the other hand, however, they look for a sense of membership – it is "longing for belonging," as prof. Hanna Świda-Ziemba puts it (see Legutko 2002). Hence perhaps more frequent appeals of the youth to ethnicity and / or locality – "Religious fundamentalism, cultural nationalism, and territorial issues are, by and large, defensive reactions. Reactions against three fundamental threats, perceived in all societies, by the majority of humankind, at this turn of the millennium. Reaction against globalisation, which dissolves the autonomy of institutions, organisations, and communication systems where people live. Reaction against networking and flexibility, which blur the boundaries of membership and involvement, individualise social relationships of production, and induce the structural instability of work, space, and time. And reaction against the crisis of the patriarchal family, at the roots of the transformation of mechanisms of security-building, socialisation, sexuality, and, therefore, of personality systems. When the world becomes too large to be controlled, social actors aim to shrink it back to their size and reach. When networks dissolve time and space, people anchor themselves in places, and recall their historic memory. When the patriarchal sustainment of personality breaks down, people affirm the transcendent value of family and community, as God's will" (Castells 2004: p. 69).

From the point of view of the debate we are presenting, we should also emphasise that the contemporary school is different from the school of the generation debating about the school. We should keep in mind that the use of multimedia, simulation games or dramas is nowadays a teaching standard (computer software, multimedia boards). Adolescents are more "structured" and the change of relationship – the child-adult/parent also translates into the student-teacher relationship. This requires a different shaping of the curriculum and learning process.

This is all forcing us to approach the EU debate in an undogmatic way, bearing in mind that young people are adopting, among others, (regardless of whether true or not) that:

- the existence of the EU is not a dogma or a destiny for European states, but an option that can and should be debated and discussed in terms of its permanence and reasonableness;

- physical and virtual movement around the world is not a merit of integration processes;
- ethical identity is becoming more important;
- the present shape of the world of politics requires changes, both in terms of national and EU regulations, the latter being often perceived as foreign.

By adopting these assumptions, the discussion of the EU can be spontaneous, fruitful and much deeper than it might seem. Such values were also present in the debate. Conducting discussion by a teaching method allowed the young people to get out of their thinking patterns and discuss very serious issues concerning the relationship between the national and the EU level, the actual level of intervention of transnational institutions in the social tissue or the institutional structure of the EU.

In conclusion, the traditional elements of the narrative of a united Europe, as indicated in the first part of the article, are no longer appealing to the younger generation. Three reasons can be mentioned: firstly, a significant number of simplifications in the understanding of integration processes; secondly, the lack of knowledge about the mechanisms of EU functioning and the understanding of the concepts of "newspeak"; thirdly, the general contestation of political processes (not just those at the European level but also at the national level). It seems that the main challenge of Europe (and especially its political elites and bureaucratic structures) is the creation of a new narrative that would be able to break into young people's minds and re-awaken enthusiasm for the unification project.

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