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IMPACT OF EUROPEAN YOUTH STRATEGY AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION IN EU ACTIVITIES ON YOUTH EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP: CASE STUDIES OF BULGARIA, ROMANIA AND SLOVAKIA *

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Abstract. The European Youth Strategy is a key EU tool addressing the diverse needs of young citizens and promoting European citizenship, but its impact lacks evidence in existing literature. Grounded in the Social Cognitive Theory, our study filled this gap by collecting independent data on young Europeans' awareness of the Strategy and participation in EU activities. Using the Global Citizenship Scale, an online survey gathered responses from 533 individuals aged 18 to 24 in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia. We explored the two constructs' influence on their European citizenship. Findings showed they predicted between 9% and 15% of European citizenship variance. As a result, our research contributes vital comparison data for evaluating the Strategy, offering nuanced insights about the target EU member states. Our insights can help policymakers, researchers, and practitioners by informing future policies and interventions and being a benchmark for evaluating their relative effectiveness.

Keywords: Bulgaria; Romania; Slovakia; European youth strategy; European citizenship; young people;

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1. Introduction

In an environment shaped by global trends, economic shifts, technological advancements, and societal transformations, the role of young people in shaping the future is crucial. Recognising the unique challenges and opportunities faced by young Europeans, the Council of the European Union (EU) has developed a European Youth Strategy (the Strategy) (European Commission, 2018). The Strategy (European Commission, 2018) is an ambitious framework designed to address the multifaceted needs of the younger generation across EU Member States.

The EU undertook a comprehensive, structured consultation dialogue process to acquire a nuanced understanding of young European's needs and inform the development of the current 2019-2027 Strategy (European Commission, 2018). Thematic discussions involving young people from across Europe focused on crucial areas of youth empowerment, encompassing education, employment, social inclusion, and active European citizenship. The primary goal was capturing their perspectives, concerns, and aspirations to inform policymaking. The dialogue included various key components such as structured consultations, youth conferences, and online engagement through platforms and social media.

The involvement of youth representatives and established feedback mechanisms were aimed at ensuring continuous input and advocacy throughout the process. For example, an online survey part of the dialogue collected feedback from 175 people (European Commission, 2017a). Insights from such instruments shaped the current 2019-2027 Strategy to reflect a commitment to creating policies that genuinely resonate with and empower the diverse realities of European youth, promoting their sense of ownership and engagement (Banjac, 2017). Thus, the Strategy became a cross-sectoral framework focusing on three core areas of action, defined as Engage, Connect and Empower (European Commission, 2018). As a result, it reflects the EU's commitment to fostering a generation that is not only equipped with the skills needed for a rapidly changing world but is also actively engaged in shaping the socioeconomic and political landscapes of active European citizens (European Commission, 2018).

2. Literature review

Active European youth participation is seen as generally low (Tzankova et al., 2021). Tzankova et al. (2021) identify four youth categories of being active: engaged trustful, engaged distrustful, unengaged trustful, and unengaged distrustful. Their two engaged profiles encompassed a third of their study participants, indicating a large number of young people exhibiting heightened civic and political awareness (Tzankova et al., 2021). Tzankova et al. (2021) argued that political distrust existed in some youth along with a critical oversight desire, which is a form of active participation. At the same time, half of their participants were trustful but passive politically and socially (Tzankova et al., 2021).

Similar political passiveness largely explained by political apathy was observed by Dahl et al. (2018). According to the authors, some European youth simply are not bothered to actively participate by utilising the representative democracy channels. At the same time, others seemed not convinced that such participation was useful (Dahl et al., 2018). While alienated rather than apathetic, they appeared to be more likely to seek other routes of influence (Dahl et al., 2018), which still fit the definition of European citizenship.

From a legal standpoint, being a European citizen entails holding citizenship in an EU member state and enjoying specific EU rights. For example, European citizens can live, work, study, and retire in any EU country without discrimination, widely known as freedom of movement. Non-discrimination safeguards protect against bias based on nationality within the EU, emphasising equal treatment. European citizens have the right to vote and run in European Parliament elections, regardless of their residence within the EU. They can also petition the European

Parliament and access EU documents, which promote transparency and address concerns directly. European citizens can seek consular protection from any EU member state in countries without their home country's representation. Thus, European citizenship may be perceived as a national citizenship extension (Allaste et al., 2022; Karolewski, 2023; Šerek & Jugert, 2018), reinforcing the broader vision of European integration and fostering shared collaboration and identity among European citizens. This European identity creation, and as an extension of the concept of European citizenship, can be influenced by multiple factors, such as the EU institutions' visibility and effectiveness (Verhaegen et al., 2017), their policies (Borz et al., 2022), government quality, corruption levels, and even living close to a European border (Bauhr & Charron, 2023).

On a more abstract level, Šerek and Jugert (2018) discuss the concept of European citizenship within two interconnected dimensions: participatory and psychological. Psychological citizenship includes various perceptions and attitudes, such as civic identity (Bauhr & Charron, 2023; Borz et al., 2022; Karolewski, 2023; Stangenberger & Formánková, 2023), a sense of empowerment (Kirtzel & Lorenz, 2023), rights (Anders, 2023) and responsibilities (Karolewski, 2023). Psychological citizenship influences adherence to public policies (Hetherington, 2005). It also shapes an inclination toward noninstitutionalised political behaviour (Kaase, 1999). Within those established boundaries of psychological citizenship, it can be assumed that promoting this first citizenship dimension amongst young Europeans is within the objectives of the Strategy (European Commission, 2018).

The second citizenship dimension, participatory, seems even more aligned with the Strategy (European Commission, 2018) than the first one. Participatory citizenship is a dynamic and engaged form of civic involvement wherein individuals actively contribute to and shape the various aspects of their community and society, such as creating youth employment opportunities (Vankov & Vankov, 2023). Going beyond the traditional roles of citizens as voters or beneficiaries of governance, young Europeans can take an active role in community activities (European Commission, 2017b), engage with civil society organisations (Vankov & Vankov, 2023), and advocate for policy improvement (Vankov, 2015; Vankov et al., 2022). This concept emphasises the importance of European citizens' active involvement in decision-making processes, whether at the local, national, or European level.

The evolving nature of participatory citizenship is reflected in the digital age. In the case of the Strategy (European Commission, 2018), EU-leveraged online platforms and social media for policy design (European Commission, 2017a) contribute to providing young Europeans with accessible and widespread opportunities for citizenship engagement.

Although the Strategy (European Commission, 2018) is part of the broader framework of EU policies aimed at addressing the challenges and opportunities faced by young Europeans, it seems to be the instrument most targeted at their participatory and psychological European citizenship. At its core, the Strategy reflects the EU's commitment to cultivating an inclusive environment, acknowledging their status as active contributors to societal development. For example, it emphasises the importance of quality education and training for young Europeans. Measures are foreseen to enhance access to education, promote skills development, and facilitate smooth transitions from education to employment. Supporting youth entrepreneurship is embedded as another means to promote employment. Example initiatives may include programs promoting internships and apprenticeships encouraging youth entrepreneurship (Vankov et al., 2023). Other measures focus on promoting cultural exchange, mobility, and international experiences for young people. Such initiatives are seen as tools to broaden perspectives, provide personal and professional development opportunities, and enhance cross-cultural understanding. In turn, cross-cultural understanding may help address social inequalities and promote inclusion by focusing on marginalised youth, such as those with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds. Creating an environment where all young Europeans can actively participate in the EU society supports the Strategy's (European Commission, 2018) central goal, which is enabling active European citizenship for young people and

their participation in democratic processes. Thus, similar to other EU policy impact analyses (Borz et al., 2022), it is paramount to understand how successful the Strategy (European Commission, 2018) might have been in achieving its goals.

As discussed, the European Commission implements public consultations to assess the Strategy's performance. Previous online survey results from such consultations (n=175) showed that 89% of the respondents were aware of the Strategy, and 59% had taken part in activities as part of it (European Commission, 2017a). In addition to surveying awareness and participation, the online survey sought to understand the respondents' broader understanding of the Strategy, exploring their perceptions about its narrow impact, broader impact, added value and priority areas addressing young people's needs (European Commission, 2017a).

A new round of consultation was open between 26 April 2023 and 2 August 2023 and received 224 responses. The preliminary results show a much lower awareness of the Strategy, 35%, and participation in activities, 32% (European Commission, 2023). This notable difference between the two surveys is not this paper's topic of discussion. However, it helps us see two significant gaps in evaluating the Strategy:

Gap 1. All public consultations are implemented under the EU umbrella, i.e. independent data collection and review of results seems to be missing.

Gap 2. Beyond counting the responses, there is missing knowledge about the channels through which the Strategy determines young people's European citizenship.

To our knowledge, no other study looks at independent data to assess the Strategy's performance. Our study is also the first to examine some of the mechanisms through which the Strategy (European Commission, 2018) influences the perception of European citizenship amongst young people and their extent. It was implemented under a robust theoretical framework.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study draws upon the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986). Through its lens, we explore the influence of the Strategy on the young people's European citizenship perception. SCT (Bandura, 1986) suggests that people function through interactions between their behaviour, personality and environment (see Figure 1).

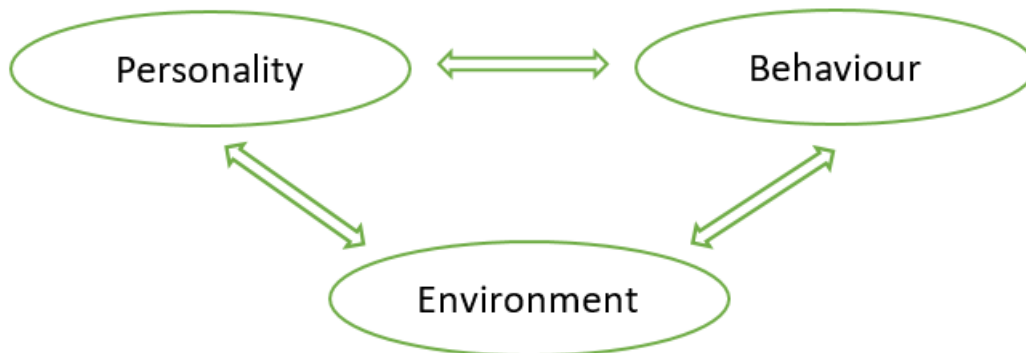


Fig. 1. Social Cognitive Theory Model.
Source: Authors' work

As described in the Literature review, the European Commission (2017a) regards the Strategy's influence as potentially twofold. One dimension is knowledge, e.g. when young people are aware of the Strategy. As a result, the Strategy forms part of their environment. According to SCT (Bandura, 1986), the environment represents people's external behavioural influencers. In the context of the Strategy, the behaviour is when young people take part in EU activities, which is the second dimension of the Strategy's influence as per the European Commission (2017a) survey. Both environment and behaviour influence personality (see Figure 1).

In line with the SCT (Bandura, 1986) key concept of reciprocal determinism, or bidirectional influence, the personality dimension of the model encompasses fundamental constructs that impact the execution of the desired behaviour and, potentially, as an extension, the environment. This dimension may include constructs such as: 1) self-efficacy, reflecting an individual's belief in their capacity to achieve defined goals; 2) outcome expectations, representing the personal anticipation of the outcomes should they perform a behaviour; or 3) self-control, indicating an individual's ability to independently regulate their intentions and actions. These constructs are influenced by reinforcements, both internal and external, which can affect the likelihood of behaviour continuation. Such reinforcements can be triggered through the environment, e.g. the Strategy and the opportunities it offers. The concept of citizenship in general, and European citizenship in particular, as a self-perception can be regarded as a manifestation of personality. SCT (Bandura, 1986) argues that personality is developed through social experience and observational learning. In line with Šerek and Jugert (2018) European citizenship concept as two interconnected dimensions, this argument applies well to the current study.

In the domain of observational learning, developing a European citizenship personality would involve believing in one's capabilities to engage in activities related to being a European citizen. Such involvement can be broad and include participating in European elections, understanding EU policies, advocating for European causes, and engaging in cross-border collaborations. For young people, it can be much narrower and limited to those participating in Strategy-related EU activities. Such European youth who perceive themselves as European citizens may believe they have the skills and knowledge to navigate these activities effectively.

When learning through observation in the context of European citizenship, young people may start by increasing their awareness of the Strategy. As a result, they will be more capable of engaging in EU programs, supporting European values, or advocating for European integration. This observation of the Strategy can influence their self-perception of their own capabilities. In conclusion, the SCT (Bandura, 1986) offered a suitable theoretical grounding for this article.

While we employed the European Commission (2017a) scales to measure Strategy awareness (environment) and EU participation (behaviour) (see Measures below) within the chosen theoretical framework, measuring personality required additional considerations. As an established scale to measure European citizenship does not seem to exist, we utilised the Global Citizenship Scale (Morais & Ogden, 2011). This scale provides a framework for assessing individuals' orientation towards citizenship, encompassing identity, responsibility, and engagement. According to the authors, the scale comprises three dimensions: social responsibility, global competence and global civic engagement, which can be further divided into three subscales each (Morais & Ogden, 2011). Each statement within the scale is measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5).

The Global Citizenship Scale (Morais & Ogden, 2011) is recognised in the literature as helpful when measuring citizenship and related concepts (Massaro, 2022). It has shown its utility in understanding citizenship in the context of young people from around the world, e.g., in Turkey (Tarman & Kilinc, 2023), Qatar (Alshawi, 2023) or Kazakhstan (Yussupova et al., 2023). Thus, it was considered a useful tool to be applied in this study to measure personality within the SCT model.

4. Research objective and hypotheses

This research surveyed 18 to 24-year-old Bulgarians, Romanians and Slovaks to explore their understanding of the Strategy and identify some of the determinants of their European citizenship. With regards to the latter, we hypothesised that:

H.1. Demographic variables (gender and age) would account for statistically significant amounts of variation in European citizenship.

H.2. Being aware of the Strategy (European Commission, 2018) and having participated in related EU activities applied over and above gender and age would predict statistically significant amounts of variation in European citizenship.

5. Method

In this section, we report on our participants, study measures, and data transformations.

5.1. Participants

The recruitment of study participants occurred between July and December 2023. The process was carried out face-to-face and online. Our eligibility criteria stipulated that participants must be between 18 and 24 years old. Implied informed consent for research participation was obtained from individuals who completed the study survey. It was considered obtained when a participant started the survey after reviewing the study information sheet. The survey data included responses from 533 individuals (128 from Bulgaria, 187 from Romania, and 218 from Slovakia). Among the participants, 251 identified as female, 264 as male, and 18 chose not to disclose their gender. The average reported age was 19.07 (SD = 1.70).

5.2. Measures

An online survey of three sections was our data-collection tool. Section One contained 2 demographic items: gender (0 = female / 1 = male / 2 = I don't want to specify) and age (in years). We administered the survey separately in each participating country. Thus, a country question was not included in the survey form.

Section Two focused on European citizenship. For the purpose of the current study, we aligned the Global Citizenship Scale (Morais & Ogden, 2011) with our European context by replacing "global" with "European" where appropriate. We further omitted using two subscales of the social responsibility dimension, which we considered could have been confusing if asked outside a "global" context. As a result, our European citizenship Scale comprised of seven subscales: social responsibility (6 items, sample statement: I think that most people around the world get what they are entitled to have.), self-awareness (3 items, sample statement: I know how to develop a place to help mitigate a European environmental or social problem.), intercultural communication (3 items, sample statement: I often adapt my communication style to other people's cultural background.), global knowledge (3 items, sample statement: I am informed of current issues that impact international relationships.), involvement in civic organisations (8 items, sample statement: Over the next 6 months, I plan to help European people who are in difficulty.), political voice (4 items, sample statement: Over the next 6 months, I will express my views about European politics on a website, blog, or chat room.), and global civic activism (3 items, sample statement: If at all possible, I will always buy fair-trade or locally grown products and brands.) (Morais & Ogden, 2011). These subscales can collectively provide a comprehensive assessment of young people's European citizenship perspectives.

Section Three contained Tier 1 and Tier 2 Strategy variables. Those were borrowed from the questionnaire used in the consultation dialogue that shaped the current 2019-2027 Strategy (European Commission, 2018). The two Tier 1 Strategy variables were the following single-item questions:

- Strategy-aware: Were you aware that the EU is active in youth policy, through the EU Youth Strategy? (Possible answers: Yes / No), and
- EU participation: Have you taken part in any activities under the EU Youth Strategy since 2010 (e.g., conference, structured dialogue process, a 'mutual learning activity' (learning from peers in other EU countries), or under the EU youth programmes (Youth in Action until 2013, Erasmus+ youth since 2014)? (Possible answers: Yes / No / I don't know) (European Commission, 2017a).

The Tier 2 Strategy variables were offered to participants who answered that they were previously aware of the Strategy (European Commission, 2018) and/or have participated in EU activities. They spanned across four topics:

- Narrow impact: 5 items, Sample question: What was the concrete impact of this activity for you or your organisation? It had a general positive impact on me (or on those involved in the activity). (Possible answers: Yes / No),
- Broader impact: 3 items, Sample question: How much do you think has the EU Youth Strategy helped national/regional policies? (Possible answers: Very much / Somewhat / Not at all / I don't know)
- Added value: 7 items, Sample question: In your opinion, what is the added value of the EU Youth Strategy compared with measures at local, regional or national level? It helps develop a youth strategy or a consistent approach to young people and youth policy at national level. (Possible answers: Agree / Disagree / I don't know), and
- Priority areas addressing young people's needs: 8 items, Sample question: In your opinion, do the priority areas of the EU Youth Strategy address young people's needs? Education and training. (Possible answers: Agree / Disagree / I don't know) (European Commission, 2017a).

5.3. Preliminary analyses and data transformations

SPSS Statistics 28 was used to check and code the survey data. The use of closed questions ensured the absence of any missing or invalid data in the study. Descriptive statistics were examined for all variables. Table 1 shows the frequencies of the two Tier 1 variables across the three countries (European Commission, 2018).

Table 1. Tier 1 Strategy variables frequencies (n=533).

Country	Possible answer (below) for items (to the right)	Strategy-aware n (%)	EU participation n (%)
Bulgaria (n=128)	Yes	48 (38%)	36 (28%)
	No	80 (62%)	78 (61%)
	I do not know	N/A	14 (11%)
Romania (n=187)	Yes	87 (54%)	42 (22%)
	No	100 (46%)	93 (50%)
	I do not know	N/A	52 (28%)
Slovakia (n=218)	Yes	69 (32%)	18 (8%)
	No	149 (68%)	138 (63%)
	I do not know	N/A	62 (29%)
All (n=533)	Yes	204 (38%)	96 (18%)
	No	329 (62%)	309 (58%)
	I do not know	N/A	128 (24%)

Table 1 shows that 38% of our respondents (n = 204) were aware of the Strategy (European Commission, 2018), and 18% (n = 96) participated in a Strategy-related EU activity. Aligned with the official EU survey (European Commission, 2018), we explored the responses to questions of those who have taken part in an EU activity since

2010. From them, 96% said the activity positively impacted them, 73% believed it allowed their voice to be heard, 89% confirmed they learned from others and applied that knowledge and 81% saw it as a networking opportunity. Of the young people who were Strategy-aware, 74% believed it somewhat or very much helped national or regional policies, 60% saw it as somewhat or very much aligned with them, and 80% believed it somewhat or very much helped young people and youth organisations. When compared with measures at a local, regional or national level, the majority of those young people agreed it helps develop a youth strategy or a consistent approach to young people and youth policy at the national level (70%), puts young people higher on the EU political agenda (60%), improves coherence between national/regional and EU-wide youth-related measures (65%), allocates more national public funding to specific activities or initiatives in the youth sector (54%), encourages young people to take part in the decision-making process at all levels (70%), and makes young people's voice heard in the European policy-shaping process (61%). Despite this positive feedback, 29% of the respondents considered it had no added value over national, regional and local measures, while another 29% could not decide whether it did or did not have. Figure 2 shows our Strategy-aware respondents' opinion of whether the priority areas of the Strategy address young people's needs, with the most added value being seen in education and training, volunteering and culture.

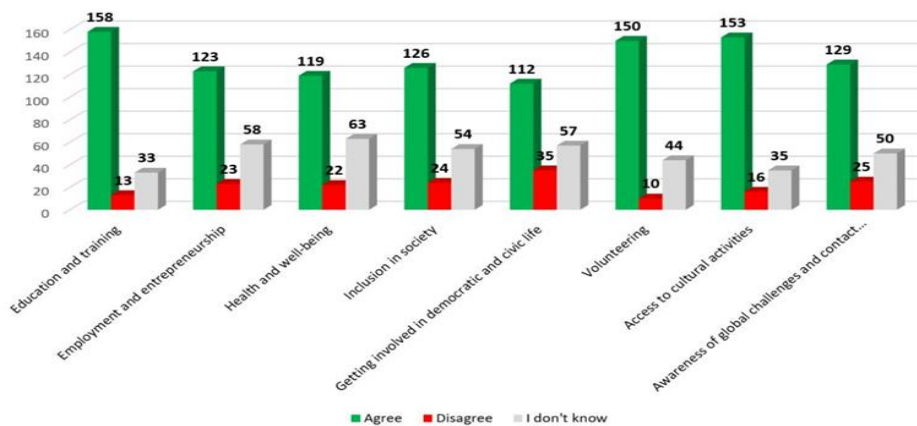


Fig. 2. Strategy's priority areas addressing young people's needs (n = 204).
Source: Authors' work.

Table 1 also reveals visible data variations across the different countries. For example, awareness of the Strategy varies from 32% in Slovakia to 54% in Romania. Former participation in EU activities ranges from only 8% in Slovakia to 28% in Bulgaria. To assess whether those differences were statistically significant, we examined the Strategy-aware and EU participation measures as two dependent variables (DVs) using a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) test with "country" as the independent variable (IV). The two DVs were recoded (transformed), so Yes = 1, No = 0, and (where applicable) I don't know = -1. An $F(4, 1058) = 8.236$ ($p < 0.001$, Wilks' Lambda = 0.941, partial eta squared = .030) indicated a statistically significant difference between the participants from the different countries on the DVs. Consequently, a decision was made to analyse the data for each country separately. Also, due to the nature of and the effort in promoting European activities, we considered it highly unlikely that a person would have participated in an activity and would not know. Hence, another decision was made to sum the 'No' and 'I do not know' responses to the EU participation question as the opposite of 'Yes' for the purpose of the subsequent analyses, Not Yes = 0.

Subsequently, for each country, the 30-item European citizenship scale showed high internal consistency (Bulgaria: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$, Romania $\alpha = 0.90$, and Slovakia $\alpha = 0.86$). Those values exceeded the acceptable

Cronbach's α limit of 0.70 (DeVellis, 2016). Thus, a European citizenship score was calculated for each respondent by averaging the scores on all 30 items. These scores were assessed for normality, statistically and visually.

For each of the three countries, the European citizenship scores' skewness and kurtosis values were in the generally accepted range of -2:2. All Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistics were insignificant. The histograms, Q-Q plots and Boxplots visual examination confirmed normal distribution. As a result, parametric linear regression was used in the main analysis to assess to what extent the European Youth Strategy awareness and EU activities participation determined European citizenship in our young target group. A regression test requires a sample size of $n = >104 + m$ number of participants for sufficient power, where m is the number of predictors (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). All three countries' samples satisfied this requirement.

6. Results

6.1. Zero-order correlations

Table 2 below presents the means, standard deviations and Pearson's r correlations for the Strategy-aware, EU participation and European citizenship variables. It shows significant but moderate correlations between the Tier 1 Strategy variables and European citizenship, with the highest value being between the Romanian Strategy-aware and European citizenship ($r = 0.356$, $p < 0.001$). The lowest values were observed in the relationships between the Slovakian EU participation and European citizenship ($r = 0.199$, $p = 0.003$). Those relationships meant that European citizenship was positively influenced by both Strategy-aware and EU participation.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and bivariate Pearson's r for each Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia separately.

Country	Variable	Scale range (min/max)	Mean (SD)	Strategy-aware	EU participation	European citizenship
Bulgaria (n = 128)	Strategy-aware	0 (No) – 1 (Yes)	0.38 (0.49)	-	0.16	0.28**
	EU participation	0 (Not Yes) – 1 (Yes)	0.28 (0.45)		-	0.29**
	European citizenship	1 (Strongly disagree) – 5 (Strongly agree)	2.78 (0.56)			-
Romania (n = 187)	Strategy-aware	0 (No) – 1 (Yes)	0.47 (0.50)	-	0.22**	0.36**
	EU participation	0 (Not Yes) – 1 (Yes)	0.23 (0.42)		-	0.20**
	European citizenship	1 (Strongly disagree) – 5 (Strongly agree)	2.68 (0.64)			-
Slovakia (n = 218)	Strategy-aware	0 (No) – 1 (Yes)	0.32 (0.47)	-	0.15*	0.22**
	EU participation	0 (Not Yes) – 1 (Yes)	0.08 (0.28)		-	0.20**
	European citizenship	1 (Strongly disagree) – 5 (Strongly agree)	2.52 (0.52)			-

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The correlation between Strategy-aware and EU participation was the least consistent. While it was statistically significant and moderate in the case of Romania, in Slovakia, it was weak and less significant, losing its significance in Bulgaria. This last relationship meant young Bulgarians might participate in EU activities without being aware of the Strategy and vice versa.

As European citizenship is a multidimensional concept (see Measures), we tested the correlations' strength and significance of Strategy-aware and EU participation with each of its seven subscales: social responsibility, self-awareness, intercultural communication, global knowledge, involvement in civic organisations, political voice, and global civic activism (Morais & Ogden, 2011). For conciseness, we do not present all available results but explore only the most notable ones.

In the case of Bulgaria, Strategy-aware had a statistically significant correlation only with three out of the seven subscales: global knowledge ($r = 0.251$, $p = 0.004$), involvement in civic organisations ($r = 0.332$, $p < 0.001$) and political voice ($r = 0.330$, $p < 0.001$). EU participation was significantly correlated with all subscales. However, some of the coefficients were weak, and some of the significant levels were lower. Its strongest correlation was $r = 0.331$ ($p < 0.001$), with global activism. The most curious observation was its negative relationship with social responsibility ($r = -0.176$, $p = 0.047$).

Somewhat similar to Bulgaria, in the case of Romania, Strategy-aware had a statistically significant correlation with global knowledge ($r = 0.391$, $p = 0.004$), involvement in civic organisations ($r = 0.306$, $p < 0.001$) and political voice ($r = 0.234$, $p = 0.001$). However, it was also equally ($r = 0.272$, $p < 0.001$) significantly moderately correlated to self-awareness and intercultural communication. Those two subscales were also equally ($r = 0.183$, $p = 0.012$) significantly weakly correlated to EU participation. In addition, EU participation had significant correlations with global knowledge ($r = 0.206$, $p = 0.005$) and involvement in civic organisations ($r = 0.147$, $p = 0.045$).

In Slovakia, being Strategy-aware was significantly correlated with the three global civic engagement subscales: involvement in civic organisations ($r = 0.217$, $p = 0.001$), political voice ($r = 0.146$, $p = 0.031$) and global activism ($r = 0.203$, $p = 0.003$). Its strongest correlation was with global knowledge ($r = 0.258$, $p < 0.001$). Similar to Romania, EU participation was equally ($r = 0.138$, $p = 0.041$) significantly but weakly correlated to self-awareness and intercultural communication. It was also weakly correlated to global knowledge ($r = 0.139$, $p = 0.040$) and involvement in civic organisations ($r = 0.152$, $p = 0.025$). The big difference with the other two countries was its positive although weak correlation with social responsibility ($r = 0.134$, $p = 0.048$).

6.2. Predicting European citizenship

In the following analyses, we assessed which measures (age, gender, Strategy-aware and EU participation) and the extent to which they accounted for the participants' European citizenship variance. We conducted multiple linear regressions for each of the three countries in two steps. Step 1 investigated the predictive validity of age and gender. Step 2 explored Strategy-aware and EU participation when applied over and above the demographic variables.

Table 3 displays the results of the multiple linear regression tests conducted for each country. The regression equation did not achieve significance in Step 1 for any of the three countries. Both demographic variables had negligible β s, meaning that when young people are concerned, neither their age nor their gender has any relevance to how they see themselves as European Citizens. As a result, our H.1, which predicted that gender and age (demographic variables) would account for statistically significant amounts of variation in European citizenship, did not find any support.

In Step 2, with the addition of the Strategy-aware and EU participation variables, the equation reached significance, explaining 15% of the variance for Bulgaria (adj. $R^2 = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$), 14% for Romania (adj. $R^2 = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$) and 9% for Slovakia (adj. $R^2 = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). Strategy-aware emerged as a significant predictor for all countries: Bulgaria ($p = 0.004$), Romania ($p < 0.001$) and Slovakia ($p = 0.002$). EU participation was a significant predictor only for Bulgaria ($p = 0.002$) and Slovakia ($p = 0.011$). Thus, although with very small amounts of explained variance, H.2, which predicted being aware of the Strategy and having participated in related EU activities, applied over and above the demographic variables, would account for statistically significant amounts of variation in European citizenship, found support.

Table 3. 2-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis using demographic and Tier 1 Strategy variables to predict European citizenship.

Variables	Bulgaria (n=128)		Romania (n=187)		Slovakia (n=218)	
	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	Step 1 β	Step 2 β
Age	-0.05	-0.02	<-0.01	-0.02	0.05	0.06
Gender	0.03	0.10	<-0.01	-0.01	-0.03	-0.06
Strategy-aware		0.25*		0.33**		0.21*
EU participation		0.27*		0.14		0.17*
R^2	<0.01	0.15**	<0.01	0.14**	<0.01	0.09**
R^2 change		0.15**		0.14**		0.08**

Standardised beta weights.

* P < 0.05

** P < 0.001

7. Discussion

Our study has significance in the applied youth studies field, particularly in relation to young people's European citizenship and its relationship with the European Youth Strategy (European Commission, 2018). This significance lies in its comprehensive approach to understanding to what extent being aware of the Strategy and having participated in related youth activities explains European citizenship in them. Utilising the SCT to predict European Citizenship establishes a theoretical basis for comprehending the impact of various constructs on self-perceptions. This theoretical framework supports the generalisability of our results and could potentially guide interventions among varied demographics.

We provide actionable insights that could aid in the development of effective interventions and policies to extend this impact within three specific European Member States. Through the examination of youth from Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, we unveil cultural subtleties and distinctions, adding to a broader comprehension that surpasses individual cultural settings. Overall, we were able to collect, analyse and present valuable data to bridge our identified Gap 2. Gap 2 stated there is missing knowledge about the channels through which the Strategy determines young people's European citizenship. Our research provided evidence that gender and age have no influence on it (H.1 not supported), while Strategy-aware and EU participation have such influence (H.2 supported).

Similar to other studies exploring EU policy (Borz et al., 2022), we showed that Strategy (European Commission, 2018) does have an impact on European citizenship. However, this impact seems to be very limited. Only between 9% (in Slovakia) and 15% (in Bulgaria) of the European citizenship variation was explained by the variables we utilised in our analyses. This result means that European citizenship is determined by many other factors that fall outside of the scope of the current study. Bauhr and Charron (2023) suggest additional factors might include government quality, corruption levels, and even living close to a European border. Verhaegen et al. (2017) additionally identify trust in other European citizens and the EU institutions.

Across Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia, we observed that Strategy-aware was more likely to be significantly correlated with the subscales from the European citizenship global civic engagement dimension. EU participation seemed to have a broader significance but was more consistently related to the global competence dimension subscales. The social responsibility dimension subscale was significantly correlated to Strategy-aware in neither country. Still, its relationship to EU participation was mixed, from negative in Bulgaria through neutral in Romania to positive in Slovakia. This result hints that depending on the desired effect and targeted influence, different strategies need to be employed in the case of each separate country.

Another consideration would be the specific content of those strategies. For example, if the objective is to expand global competence, the focus should be on offering as many and diverse EU activities as possible. If efforts aim

at encouraging civic engagement, raising awareness about the Strategy would be more likely to succeed. In both cases, though, special measures should be taken to avoid influencing social responsibility negatively. Such negative influence, of course, could result from interplay with other factors.

The potentially large number of factors that might interplay in determining European citizenship that are outside the domain of the Strategy (European Commission, 2018) might be the explanation for the 58% of our respondents being unsure of its added value or stating it has none over national, regional and local measures. On the one hand, the uncertainty might be due to the inherent passivity of many European young people (Dahl et al., 2018; Tzankova et al., 2021). On the other, the negative assessment might be rooted in the extent to which the Strategy (European Commission, 2018) is informed by the young European's perspectives, concerns, and aspirations.

Although the Strategy (European Commission, 2018) was designed to address multifaceted youth needs, the data used to inform it does not seem very objective. Such a notion may provide support for previous findings that many young people feel alienated and see little value in some forms of active participation (Dahl et al., 2018). The initial EU survey results showed 89% of the respondents to be Strategy-aware and 59% to have benefited from EU participation (European Commission, 2017a). Although the latest consultation returned much more moderate results, 35% Strategy-aware respondents and 32% with EU participation (European Commission, 2023), they are different from our findings. We found Strategy awareness to be only 3% higher in our population, at 38%. However, EU participation was close to half of the official results, i.e., 18%, supporting the current literature in that youth participation is generally low (Tzankova et al., 2021). One may argue that the very close official results' values, i.e. 35% and 32%, might have been derived from people who had a record of participation in EU activities, which is why they were aware of the Strategy. As a result, we believe that we successfully helped bridge the identified Gap1. Gap 1 stated that all public consultations are implemented under the EU umbrella, so independent data collection and review of results seem to be missing.

In bridging Gap 1, we provide not only an indication of the Strategy-aware and EU participation proportion of young people in the participating countries but also explore their perception of the broader impact of being Strategy-aware and having participated in an EU activity. Such detailed data can guide European, national, regional, and local youth policies. It can also serve to derive correction coefficients for official consultations or as a benchmark for future studies.

7.1. Strengths and limitations

One notable strength of this study is its exploration of independent data to shed light on the Strategy's performance. To the best of our knowledge, it is also the first to examine mechanisms through which the Strategy (European Commission 2018) influences the perception of European citizenship amongst young people and their extent. Consequently, the study brings forth novel insights that can inform national and European decision-making in designing, adapting, and adopting youth-related strategies to tackle issues associated with young Europeans.

While European policies often underlie national, regional and local ones, our research recognised the diversity among the studied countries, emphasising that uniform strategies may not yield identical effects in all contexts. Thus, the study provides valuable knowledge supporting the implementation of tailored approaches to promote European citizenship in the specific countries under investigation.

Despite its strengths, the study faced certain limitations. For instance, the reliance on self-reported data introduces susceptibility to bias. To mitigate this, the study employed anonymous data collection to ensure

participants felt no potential consequences for their responses. In addition, European citizenship is not a topic that carries social stigma. Thus, our concern about respondents reporting biased data was minimal.

An additional limitation pertains to the study's omission of exploring other factors influencing young people's self-perception of European citizenship. Consequently, further research is imperative to uncover these underlying influences and enhance our understanding of the intricate dynamics at play.

Despite those weaknesses, our article significantly contributes to the literature on European citizenship in several ways. For example, we illustrate how the Strategy plays a role in shaping European citizenship perceptions in young Europeans. Our argument centres on the concept that European citizenship comprises participatory and psychologically interconnected dimensions (Šerek & Jugert, 2018). Unfortunately, we could not identify prior studies exploring the subject from a quantitative perspective, which might have served as a base for comparison within the Strategy domain. While available literature approaches the topic as a discussion (Anders, 2023; Karolewski, 2023; Kirtzel & Lorenz, 2023), we utilised the new data from our survey and conducted more comprehensive tests. This approach enables a closer examination of the practical implications resulting from the Strategy, which lays a fertile ground for future research endeavours.

7.2. Future research

Equipped with the insights generated from our findings, researchers and practitioners have the opportunity to formulate strategies, campaigns, and interventions targeting the specific constructs we have identified as significant. It is imperative to customise these promotional endeavours to align with the distinct needs and characteristics identified within the contexts of the targeted countries. Additionally, the impact of these endeavours should undergo independent evaluation over time to assess their effectiveness.

8. Conclusions

The present study sheds light first on how young people's self-perception of European citizenship is influenced. In particular, we explored the effects of demographic (age and gender) and European Youth Strategy (Strategy-awareness and EU activities participation) variables. In a multiple linear regression, those variables were used to understand the predictors of European citizenship. The results suggest that demographic variables had no effect on any of the assessed country samples. However, being Strategy-aware and having experienced EU participation predicted European citizenship, although with different strengths in the case of the different countries. These results can assist in shaping forthcoming policies and interventions. Simultaneously, they can serve as a benchmark for evaluating the relative effectiveness of these policies and interventions.

In conclusion, our SCT-grounded findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of the relationships between Strategy-aware, EU participation, and European citizenship across diverse European contexts. Tailoring interventions to the specific socio-cultural context of each country appears essential for the effective promotion of European citizenship and engagement with the European Youth Strategy. Further research exploring additional contextual factors and employing qualitative methods could deepen our understanding of these complex dynamics.

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