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Introduction: Experiencing Europe at the Periphery

The EU is a civilising experiment that must be praised for successfully overcoming struggles between nation states and projecting peace and stability, even beyond its borders, for more than half a century. The recent blatant, old-style aggression of Russia in Ukraine has once again proved the moral superiority, and the practical importance, of the EU in the positive transformation of states and societies.

The EU, as a phenomenon *sui generis*, has long attracted the interest of policymakers, scholars, and ordinary citizens around the globe. This is especially true in the neighbouring regions of the EU that are affected by intra- and inter-state conflicts, as well as governance challenges of various types. The emancipation of the multidisciplinary field of European Studies, the proliferation of the respective schools, research centres, and national or transnational associations, as well as widespread concepts such as "Europeanisation," are evidence of the growing interest in the subject.

Despite all imperfections and shortcomings regarding its model of governance, seeing it criticised by both friends and foes of European integration, alongside widespread Euroscepticism, rising illiberalism among the societies of both member states and potential candidates, enlargement fatigue inside the union, and failures to establish the EU as a global security actor, interest in the EU has not vanished. On the contrary, new waves of research emerge, putting forward new research questions, and suggesting new epistemological and methodological solutions and approaches.

Many research designs attempt to revise the existing corpus of knowledge and apply it to contemporary dynamics. One of the most insightful exercises of this kind is to look at the EU and its transformative role through a structuralist, centre-periphery lens, and to emphasise the periphery perspective: not only noting how the EU, as a core, projects its values and implements certain activities in the periphery (defined as neighbouring countries with or without immediate membership aspirations or perspectives, as well as new member states that still struggle to influence the decision-making core of the Union), but also how the EU is perceived, understood, and treated in those areas.

The LEAP (Linking to Europe at the Periphery) is a Jean Monnet

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Network project addressing the centre-periphery dynamics of the EU by looking at the cases of Romania (new member state), Turkey (long-time candidate), Ukraine (candidate status recently granted), and Georgia and Kosovo (with membership perspectives). The project is implemented by the consortium led by the Centre for European Studies at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey (CES-METU), one of the most acknowledged research centres specialising in European integration. The other members of the consortium are the Eskisehir Osmangazi University, Turkey; National University of Political Science and Public Administration, Romania; University of Prishtina, Kosovo; Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine; and Ilia State University, Georgia.[1]

In the framework of the project, Ilia State University organised the scientific workshop " Experiencing Europe" on March 29-30, 2021. The workshop aimed to discuss the everydayness of the EU from different angles. Since Europe/the EU is not solely a geographic phenomenon, but has its political, social, and cultural meaning, it is constantly constructed and reconstructed when it faces local circumstances. As a result, Europeanisation is often changed and adapted to local needs and interests, knowledge and perceptions, and many other dynamics.

The workshop hosted more than 20 participants from universities of Georgia, Turkey, Romania, Ukraine, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Israel, and the USA. The participants of the workshop presented topics about how Europe in general, and the EU specifically, are perceived and experienced in the everyday lives of countries and societies at the periphery. The participants looked at the subject of discussion from various fields, among them politics, economy, culture, and even scientific collaboration. The authors represented not only different fields, but also diverse ontological and epistemological schools.

Several participants were later invited to expand their presentations as contributions to this special issue. The submitted papers were reviewed by blind reviewers and revised by the authors themselves. Below, we summarise the main content of these articles.

Irakli Laitadze's article, "Reinventing Europeanness as a tool of Negotiation" takes Georgia's relations with the EU as its major focus. The author provides a brief historical retrospective of the first steps and milestones in EU-Georgia relations since the 1990s, as the country regained its political independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The paper deals with the major challenges in EU-Georgia cooperation, some of which are exogenous to Georgia and internal to the EU itself, including pressures on

1For more information about the LEAP project and some of its outputs, see https://www.leapjmnetwork.com/

the single currency and single market, Brexit, social, economic, and political tensions caused by mass immigration, relations with resurgent and revisionist Russia, and internal divisions among EU member-states on vital aspects of the community's existing challenges and steps to be taken to address them. The author demonstrates that the EU's attitudes towards Georgia have gradually transformed from viewing Georgia as a backyard to Russia in the early 1990s to uncovering Georgia's economic, transit and political significance, especially since the Rose Revolution in 2003. Besides some of the structural peculiarities endogenous to Georgia itself, the author stresses the significance of symbolic meanings that ordinary Georgians attach to Georgia-EU relations. Belief that Georgia is not just a European country, but one of the oldest European countries, is embedded in Georgia's understanding of itself and its relations with the EU, and outside world generally. The construction of Georgian identity in such civilisational terms, the paper argues, can somehow damage its pragmatic approach to its relations with the EU, while lowering the expectations and taking more realistic positions on many aspects of Georgia-EU relations could lead to more tangible results. And yet, he notes, if this civilisational mantra is taken too far, it can hamper rational and strategic aspects of EU-Georgia relations, it can provide a stable basis for long-term efforts to keep Georgia on track to EU integration, amidst external and internal pressures which might otherwise push the country in the opposite direction. Finding a delicate balance between the country's self-perception as a rightful part of Europe and its strategic circumstances should make up the road ahead.

The significance of the local context, cultural views and identities, alongside economic and geopolitical considerations, is also the focus of the next article. **Elena Stefanescu, in "Experiencing the European Union in the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe"**, demonstrates that the EU is differently perceived in different Eastern Partnership countries, and those differences cannot be accounted for by such objective variables as geographical demarcations, instead being related to local experiences, contexts, and the identities of the respective countries and societies. The author contends, for instance, that the Georgians' attitudes and expectations towards the EU come much closer to the views held by the Ukrainians and Moldovans, rather than those of the Armenians or Azerbaijanis, despite their sharing the same geographic region. From the theoretical perspective, the author relies on the concept of the EU being a normative power, as opposed to the EU as a geopolitical power. The EU as a normative power is a set of values and principles which govern relations among its member states, are embedded into their identities, and which are also expected to be met by others. In discussing various aspects and implications of the EU's normative power, the author touches on an important topic of

how the EU is perceived among the populations of EaP countries in terms of its potential to influence local cultures and traditions. Based on the results of various surveys, the author contends that in all EaP countries there are – to several degrees – perceptions that the EU does not protect national traditions, although she recognises that not all countries demonstrate similar attitudes, and these perceptions vary according to the political aspirations the countries have. Accordingly, societies with straightforward pro-European aspirations, like Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, have a somewhat more relaxed view of the EU's potential to threaten their national identity, compared to countries such as Belarus, for example. That said, the potential for conflicting interpretations of the EU's normative power, while it to varying extents still exists in all EaP countries, can be seen as a challenge ahead for the EU in consolidating its normative power of attraction and receptiveness in its neighbourhood and beyond, especially in light of Russia's declared policy of positioning itself as the sole "guarantor of traditional values", as opposed to the EU's modern and postmodern value sets. In conclusion, the article calls for the EU to explore the inherent differences between the EaP countries, be they political, social, ideological or cultural, and to continue on its path to abandoning "one size fits all" approaches.

A call for the deconstruction of the established hegemonic understandings of Europe and Europeanness, using the example of Albania, is made in the next article by **Inxhi Brisku**. The article, "**When I say Europe, I mean Catholicism! The perception of Europe in the discourse of Albanian intellectuals after the fall of state socialism**" focuses on the role of Albanian intellectuals (writers, publicists, journalists) in constructing a particular understanding of Europeanness, which, the author contends, is not only archaic, but also has the potential to create multiple sources of conflict among Albania's multicultural communities. The author discusses two opposing understandings of European identity: One is essentialist, favoured by leading Albanian intellectuals, and an alternative, constructivist approach, which not only criticizes the essentialist ideas, but aims to deconstruct hegemonic concepts of Europeanness as defined by those intellectuals. The essentialist approach rests on several assumptions about the meaning of Europe: Eurocentrism and Christianity, more precisely Catholicism and Protestantism, whose roots are to be found in Greco-Roman civilizations, in Enlightenment and modernity. This understanding of the European idea is static and ahistorical, and those elements, essentialists believe, still define major aspects of the European idea in the contemporary epoch. In contrast to this static idea of Europe being fixed around Christianity, constructivism, as the author contends, provides an intellectual space for opening the borders of the debate, considering Europe as

a plurality of identities, not just a homogenous "European" identity. The author believes that constructivism offers not only a better alternative to essentialist approaches in strictly academic terms, but it also better suits the peculiarities of modern multireligious Albanian society. Essentialist discourses with a focus on the defining role of Christianity in the idea of Europeanness endangers the cohesion of Albanian society, and implicitly plants seed of conflict on religious and regional grounds, creating a potential for the exclusion of some groups and the inclusion of others on religious or other bases in the understanding of Albania's European idea. The article implies that challenging the hegemonic positions of essentialist ideas, as practiced by leading Albanian intellectuals, is considered not only an academically and intellectual worthy thing to do but is also justifiable on pragmatic and moral grounds.

The fourth and the final article of the special issue, by **Olena Tupakhina, "Communicating European Values through Ukrainian Popular Culture: Case Study of the Jean Monnet European Values in Literary Arts Module"** analyses the social impact that local pop-culture can have in shaping and transforming Ukrainian society's preferences, behaviour and value sets on its way towards the European political, economic and cultural arena. As the author argues, in Ukraine, in light of the ongoing aggression from Russia, public discussion around Ukraine's pop-culture development was centred, on the one hand, on banning pro-Russian cultural products from the internal market, and on the other, in various (whether at the state or grassroots levels) attempts to align local pop-culture with the state's pro-European aspirations. Although the author demonstrates that such attempts came into confrontation with the local traditionalist/survivalist value sets of Ukrainian society, at the same time, in a more optimistic way, the author demonstrates that those cultural products which are designed for teenage and young generation Ukrainians are working better, thus signalling the younger generation's gradual shift from traditional-survivalist to more secular-rational values.

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