

European Youth Strategy awareness and EU participation: Evaluating the intervention impact on young people's European citizenship in four countries

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Abstract

The European Youth Strategy and its tools are pivotal instruments within the European Union policies framework to meet the varied needs of young citizens while fostering a sense of European citizenship. However, the extent of those tools' impact lacks empirical evidence in the existing literature. To address this gap, we employed a quasi-experimental post-test design with both intervention and control groups across four countries. Underpinned by the Social Cognitive Theory, our research aimed at unveiling insights into the effects of an intervention focused on raising awareness about the European Youth Strategy as part of an EU project on the participants' European citizenship self-perceptions. The intervention consisted of workshops and informational sessions aimed at enhancing participants' understanding of the European Youth Strategy. Using an adapted Global Citizenship Scale, we conducted an online survey among 1403 individuals aged 18 to 24 with mixed results. The results showed varied outcomes, ranging from positive effects in Slovakia to neutral effects in Romania and Hungary and negative impacts in Bulgaria. Females tended to respond more positively to the intervention than males, though this was evidenced primarily in Hungary and Slovakia. These findings suggest that country-specific cultural and contextual factors play a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of such interventions. Consequently, our research offers crucial comparative data for evaluating European citizenship projects, presenting nuanced insights into the targeted EU member states. It contributes to the limited empirical literature on the impact of the European Youth Strategy and underscores the need for more targeted, context-sensitive approaches in promoting European citizenship among youth. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to capture long-term effects and investigate further the mechanisms behind the observed gender differences.

Keywords: *Young people, Social Cognitive Theory, European citizenship, European Youth Strategy, Quasi-experiment*

Introduction

European citizenship is a contemporary citizenship type that refers to identity belonging beyond a single European country. Contemporary citizenship is a multidimensional concept that can be

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explored in multiple contexts, such as informal, individual, or online (Suppers, 2024). Defining citizenship outside a traditional nation-state, such as the European Union (EU), adds a further layer of complexity. A traditional state typically features a unified military, a national foreign policy, and the ability to raise taxes directly, something the EU does not have. However, the EU can negotiate treaties, make laws binding to its Member States, and establish policies that impact various aspects of their citizens' lives. As a result, a citizen of an EU Member State is also considered a European citizen (Santana-Vega et al., 2021).

Research shows that many people (e.g. 85%) may consider themselves European citizens (Santana-Vega et al., 2021). European citizenship entitles individuals to specific EU rights. Those rights include the widely recognized freedom of movement, allowing them to retire, work, pursue education, and reside in a member state of their choice without facing discrimination. The EU ensures non-discrimination measures to prevent biases based on nationality within its borders, emphasizing the equal treatment principle. Moreover, EU citizens can vote and stand as candidates in elections for the European Parliament, irrespective of where in EU they live. They also can address the Parliament directly through petitions and access EU documents, which promotes transparency within the Union. Additionally, European citizens are entitled to any EU member state consular protection when they are in a country where their own country does not have diplomatic representation. Overall, European citizenship might be viewed as an extension of national citizenship (Allaste et al., 2022; Karolewski, 2023; Šerek & Jugert, 2018).

European citizenship can strengthen the overall goal of European integration and encourage a sense of identity and collaboration among European citizens. Developing a European identity, as part of the broader European citizenship concept, can be shaped by various factors, including European policies (Borz et al., 2022), living close to a European border, corruption levels and government quality (Bauhr & Charron, 2023). As a result, this represents a process widely supported by the European Commission (EC), which is why the EC regularly publishes a European citizenship report (European Commission, 2023). Its aim is to increase awareness among both citizens and public administrations of the progress made (European Commission, 2023).

To enable understanding that progress, there is a need to understand the meaning of European citizenship outside its legal implications. At a more conceptual level, Šerek and Jugert (2018) regard European citizenship as intertwined participatory and psychological dimensions. The

psychological one encompasses diverse attitudes and perceptions, e.g. rights (Anders, 2023), obligations (Karolewski, 2023) and a sense of empowerment (Kirtzel & Lorenz, 2023) leading to a civic identity (Bauhr & Charron, 2023; Borz et al., 2022; Karolewski, 2023; Stangenberger & Formánková, 2023). This psychological aspect of citizenship shapes adherence to public policies (Hetherington, 2005) and influences inclinations toward noninstitutionalized political behavior (Kaase, 1999; Suppers, 2024). Promoting the psychological dimension of European citizenship, particularly amongst young people, is widely supported on the European level (European Commission, 2023). This support is shaped through a dedicated European Youth Strategy (European Commission, 2018).

The European Youth Strategy (European Commission, 2018) provides even stronger support to the second citizenship dimension, which is participatory. Participatory citizenship represents an active and dynamic form of civic engagement where individuals contribute actively to shaping various facets of their communities and societies, such as generating opportunities for youth employment (Vankov & Vankov, 2023). Going beyond the traditional recipients of governance and voters citizens' roles, European youth can engage in various community initiatives (European Commission, 2017b), collaborate with civil organizations (Vankov & Vankov, 2023), and become policy advocates (Vankov, 2015; Vankov et al., 2022). In its report (European Commission, 2023), the EC explores the tools to achieve the desired outcomes, such as the Erasmus+ program and the European Youth Strategy itself (European Commission, 2018).

Aligning with EU policies' broader scope, i.e. addressing the specific opportunities and challenges young Europeans encounter, the European Youth Strategy (European Commission, 2018) is focused on nurturing their European citizenship participatory and psychological aspects. It reflects the EU's dedication to fostering inclusion and recognizing the active role of young people in societal progress, particularly in an environment shaped by global transformations, technological advancements, and economic shifts. For example, emphasizing the significance of offering high-quality training and education to young Europeans, it details steps to enhance educational access, support skill development, and ensure smooth transitions from education to the workforce. Furthermore, it integrates support for youth entrepreneurship to bolster employment prospects. Example initiatives might include promoting internships and apprenticeships that encourage entrepreneurial endeavors among young people (Vankov et al., 2023).

Additionally, the European Youth Strategy (European Commission, 2018) emphasizes promoting international experiences, mobility, and cultural exchange for the youth to promote European citizenship. These are viewed as means to open opportunities, support professional and personal growth, and enlarge cross-cultural understanding. Consequently, this awareness could aid in addressing social inequalities and advancing inclusion, particularly for marginalized youth, including people with disabilities or from underprivileged background. By establishing a setting where young Europeans can engage in EU society, the European Youth Strategy (European Commission, 2018) aims to fulfil its central objective of enabling active European citizenship among young individuals and fostering their democratic processes participation. Therefore, similar to assessments of other policy impacts (Borz et al., 2022), understanding the success of undertaken initiatives in achieving policy goals is crucial. Unfortunately, literature on the European Youth Strategy tools influence on the European citizenship perceptions of young people is very limited. The European Commission (2017a) regards the European Youth Strategy influence as twofold. Knowledge or young people's European Youth Strategy awareness of its objectives and tools is one dimension. In more abstract terms, the European Youth Strategy would form part of their environment. In its context, related youth behavior would mean that young people participate in EU activities. Active participation represents the European Youth Strategy's influence second dimension, as per the European Commission (2017a). As theoretical constructs, behavior and environment are known to influence personality dimensions (Bandura, 1986), which in our case can be European citizenship. Thus, our research fits well within the narrative of the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical underpinning of this study is grounded in the SCT (Bandura, 1986). According to the theory, human functioning is shaped by the interplay of people's behavior, personality traits, and environmental factors (see Figure 1). Within this framework, we investigate how a European Youth Strategy initiative influences the perception of European citizenship among young Europeans.

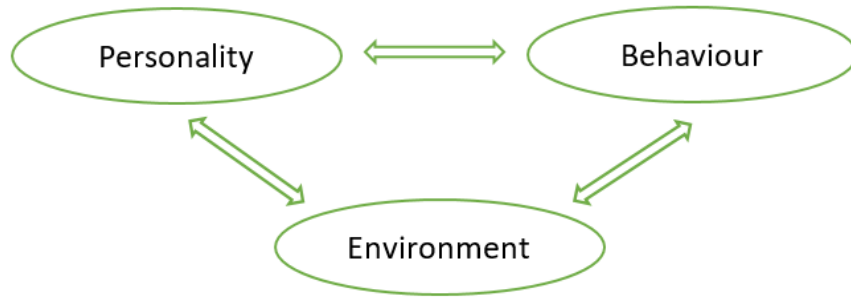


Figure 1. Social Cognitive Theory Model.

Consistent with SCT's (Bandura, 1986) principle of reciprocal determinism, which highlights the bidirectional influence between behavior, personality, and environment, the model's personality dimension includes essential constructs affecting desired behaviors' enactment. Moreover, it extends to potentially influence the environment itself. Within such personality dimension, we consider the following constructs: 1) self-efficacy, which refers to a person's confidence in their capability to accomplish particular goals; 2) outcome expectations, which are the personal predictions about the results of engaging in a behavior; and 3) self-control, which denotes a person's ability to manage their actions and intentions independently. Internal and external reinforcements influence these factors, affecting the probability of continuing the behavior. Environmental factors, such as the European Youth Strategy and the opportunities it provides, can serve as triggers for these reinforcements.

We could view the citizenship concept, including European citizenship self-perception, as a personality trait reflection. SCT (Bandura, 1986) posits observational learning and social experiences as encouraging personality development. This perspective aligns with Šerek and Jugert (2018) discussion of European citizenship as comprising two dimensions, which is particularly relevant in the context of our study.

Within the framework of social experiences and observational learning (Bandura, 1986), developing one's European citizenship entails fostering a belief in their ability to engage in activities associated with the concept. Such activities may encompass a broad spectrum, ranging from participation in European elections and comprehension of EU policies to involvement in cross-border collaborations and advocacy for European causes. For young people, this scope might narrow down to having engaged in a single EU project linked to the European Youth Strategy.

In the realm of European citizenship observational learning, youth might begin by deepening their European Youth Strategy knowledge. This enhanced understanding could then help them become more adept at participating in EU initiatives, promoting European values, or supporting European integration. The interaction with the European Youth Strategy can significantly influence the self-assessment of their capabilities, i.e. personality. In summary, the SCT (Bandura, 1986) provides a suitable theoretical framework for our study.

Within the SCT framework (Bandura, 1986), we implemented an intervention to promote European Youth Strategy awareness (environment) and EU participation (behavior). To measure them, we employed scales developed by the European Commission (2017a). Details are provided in the "Measures" section below. However, assessing personality required additional considerations. Given the absence of an established scale specifically designed to measure European citizenship, we investigated the Global Citizenship Scale (Morais & Ogden, 2011).

The Global Citizenship Scale (Morais & Ogden, 2011) encompasses identity, responsibility, and engagement, thus offering a structured framework for evaluating individuals' citizenship orientation. It comprises three main dimensions: global civic engagement, global competence, and social responsibility (Morais & Ogden, 2011), which cover the personality constructs discussed above. Each dimension further breaks into three subscales (Morais & Ogden, 2011). The statements within a subscale are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5).

Widely acknowledged in the literature as a valuable tool for assessing citizenship and related concepts, the Global Citizenship Scale (Morais & Ogden, 2011) has demonstrated utility in various cultural contexts. Previous studies have applied this scale to understand citizenship among young people in diverse settings such as Turkey (Tarman & Kilinc, 2023), Qatar (Alshawhi, 2023) or Kazakhstan (Yussupova et al., 2023). Therefore, we deemed it a suitable instrument for measuring personality within the SCT model for this study.

Research significance

Despite the EU's efforts to promote citizenship and civic engagement through initiatives like the European Youth Strategy (European Commission, 2018), a significant empirical gap remains, as shown above. This study aims to address it by providing evidence on the effectiveness of

interventions designed to raise awareness of the European Youth Strategy, focusing on their influence on European citizenship perceptions. This research provides crucial comparative insights by examining the impact in four diverse EU member states - Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria. It contributes to the growing body of research on youth citizenship education.

The study's findings help address a critical need for evidence-based recommendations for improving the design of future youth engagement policies. Moreover, the study offers practical implications for EU policymakers and educators by highlighting that a one-size-fits-all approach may not suffice. Instead, localized and gender-sensitive strategies may be necessary to foster European citizenship more effectively. Additionally, the study applies Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) to understand how policy interventions shape youth citizenship, laying a foundation for future longitudinal research to capture their long-term effects.

Research question and hypotheses

As an early indication of a long-term impact, our focus was to assess the immediate responses of Bulgarians, Hungarians, Romanians and Slovaks aged 18 to 24 after impacting their environment and behavior through a targeted intervention. To help expand the limited literature on the subject, we aimed to answer the following research question: *What impact does an intervention focused on raising awareness about the European Youth Strategy as part of an EU project have on the project participants' European citizenship self-perceptions?* We hypothesized that participants would report significantly greater European citizenship scores as compared to a Control Group immediately after the intervention (H1). We also hypothesized that the intervention would affect females and males differently (H2). Our second hypothesis was based on our experience that males and females may respond differently to interventions (Vankov & Vankov, 2023).

Method

Research Design

Although a good approach for the study would have been either a random intervention/control assignment or a pre-test/post-test design, both options were considered suboptimal. Employing random group assignment would have meant that any identified target population had to be split and a portion excluded from the intervention. Such an approach would have been against the spirit of the context (see Context and tools) within which the study was taking place and could have

triggered moral concerns. Hence, random group assignment was considered inappropriate, and we adopted a quasi-experiment with convenience Intervention and Control group research design.

The concerns around employing a pre-test/post-test design were practical. Other recent projects with similar participating populations, although on different topics, suffered from significant drop-out rates of up to 58% (Vankov et al., 2023; Vankov et al., 2023; Vankov et al., 2021). The larger the population and the more random the recruitment, which was the current study case, the higher the drop-out rate (Vankov et al., 2023; Vankov et al., 2021). Hence, to maximize the response rate, we adopted a post-test design for the current study.

Procedure and implementation

This study was implemented as part of an EU project aiming to explain the European Youth Strategy directly and in person to young Europeans in a form and language that they would understand. It was delivered as open public sessions in the form of workshops that took place in schools, universities, festivals and career fairs. A total of 28 such sessions took place: 14 in Bulgaria, 10 in Hungary, 14 in Romania and 10 in Slovakia. There were variations between and within the four countries.

In Bulgaria, the interventions unfolded as a series of engaging 1-hour workshops led by eight trained young volunteers. Each workshop featured a tailored PowerPoint presentation delving into the strategy's core concepts and implications for young Europeans. The interactive nature triggered lively discussions and thoughtful reflections. Post-workshop, participants completed an online survey, providing feedback on their European citizenship self-perceptions. The Hungarian intervention efforts took shape in three formats. Large-scale events like the 4-day Campus Festival in Debrecen saw a tent housing the project's information stand. Young volunteers engaged with attendees seated on benches and chairs, facilitating in-depth discussions. School events were an educational supplement where volunteers presented the European Youth Strategy. Lastly, a youth conference featured a presentation on visual communication and the project's outcomes, with volunteers interacting with attendees during breaks. In Romania, there was a consistent intervention approach across varied settings. At festivals like Tabakó, a project information stand displayed relevant information materials and a dedicated team discussed the project's essence, the European Youth Strategy and its messages. Similar strategies were employed at student camps, conferences, and school events, with informative presentations, comic book access, and

questionnaire completion facilitated by workers and volunteers. In Slovakia, the intervention events unfolded across summer camps, high schools, and universities, engaging in 1-1.5-hour workshops. These workshops integrated a PowerPoint presentation alongside an engagement task to connect with participants so that young people could learn about and discuss the European Youth Strategy.

A comic book with four youth stories was developed in multiple languages to inform discussions (see Figure 2). With each participant receiving a copy of the comic book, the stories introduced the European Youth Strategy Engage, Connect and Empower pillars, plus an additional one, The dark side of social media. In the first story, a young individual, disillusioned by their societal voicelessness due to financial limitations, seeks a platform beyond their circumstances. They discover the Erasmus+ program and find an avenue to pursue their aspirations, joining a project to nurture leadership and political awareness. In this journey, they collaborate with like-minded peers to develop an app bridging youth-politics gaps through accessible news updates and opinion platforms. This narrative reflects the Engage pillar of the European Youth Strategy, emphasizing inclusive democratic participation, citizenship education, and the use of digital tools to empower youth voices in decision-making.



Figure 2. Comic book cover page in Bulgarian.

In the second story, multiple young participants embark on an Erasmus+ venture, embodying the Connect pillar. They cultivate profound relationships through cross-border opportunities, share diverse experiences, and foster intercultural understanding. Beginning with a group discussion on post-graduation plans, the friends venture into a volunteering project in Spain, where cultural exchange flourishes over campfires and storytelling. Overcoming personal barriers like public speaking fears, the participants bond, cementing beliefs in cross-border initiatives' transformative powers. The narrative encapsulates the EU's aim to promote solidarity and intercultural exchange, shaping a connected European community.

The third story tells about a young person's transformative journey through volunteerism and leadership, illustrating the profound impact of youth work. Inspired by encounters with societal needs, they embark on a path of self-discovery and social responsibility. Mentored through various volunteer avenues, from local projects to global initiatives, they grow into a respected leader championing societal change. The story underlines the importance of quality youth work in nurturing initiative, resilience, and social consciousness. According to the story, by Empowering young individuals, societies can pave the way for active participation in shaping brighter futures. Finally, the fourth story delves into the European Youth Goal on mental health and wellbeing. The narrative navigates the adverse effects of excessive social media on young people. Observing pervasive smartphone usage among peers, the protagonist witnesses the toll on mental health and social interactions. Despite struggles with isolation and frustration, a turning point arises as they create a video spotlighting social media's pitfalls. This catalyzes a movement among peers to disconnect and prioritize real-life connections. The story highlights the need to address mental health concerns, particularly in the digital age, showcasing young people's resilience in fostering healthier tech habits.

Participants

Participant recruitment took place from July to December 2023, utilizing face-to-face and online methods, such as social media and email campaigns. The Intervention group was recruited entirely face-to-face because participants had to physically participate in a session and receive the comic book (Context and tools above). The Control group recruitment was mixed. Nevertheless, the utilized criteria for participation were the same.

Our criteria for eligibility specified that individuals needed to fall within the age range of 18 to 24 years. Implied consent for participating in the research was acquired from everyone who completed the survey. Informed consent was deemed to be provided when a person began the survey after reading the information sheet. A total of 1403 young people from Bulgaria (n=334), Hungary (n=256), Romania (n=392) and Slovakia (n=421) completed the survey. Among these participants, 47 chose not to disclose their gender, 592 identified as male, and 764 as female. The reported average age was 19.10 (SD = 1.72).

Instrument design and validation

For this study, we designed a structured online survey as the primary instrument for data collection. The survey consisted of 34 items spread across three sections, each designed to capture specific aspects relevant to the research. The instrument was carefully developed to gather information on demographics, European citizenship self-perception, and European Youth Strategy awareness and participation.

Our first section collected demographic information, age and gender, with options for participants to identify as female, male, or prefer not to specify. We administered the survey separately in each of the four countries. Hence, country questions were not asked explicitly.

The second section focused on measuring European citizenship and was adapted from the Global Citizenship Scale (Morais & Ogden, 2011). To tailor the Global Citizenship Scale (Morais & Ogden, 2011) to our EU context, we replaced "global" with "European" where relevant to the current study. Additionally, we opted not to include two of the social responsibility subscales, as we believed they might be confusing if presented without a "global" context. As a result, seven subscales were included in our European citizenship Scale as follows: 6 social responsibility items (sample: The world is generally a fair place.), 3 self-awareness items (sample: I am able to get other people to care about European problems that concern me.), 3 intercultural communication items (sample: I am able to communicate in different ways with people from different cultures.), 3 global knowledge items (sample: I feel comfortable expressing my views regarding a pressing European problem in front of a group of people.), 8 involvement in civic organizations items (sample: Over the next 6 months, I will work informally with a group toward solving a European humanitarian problem.), 4 political voice items (sample: Over the next 6 months, I will contact or

visit someone in government to seek public action European issues and concerns.), and 3 global civic activism items (sample: I will boycott brands or products that are known to harm marginalized European people and places.) (Adapted from Morais & Ogden, 2011).

Together, these subscales offered a thorough evaluation of the perspectives on European citizenship among young individuals. Testing the internal consistency of the European citizenship Scale ($n=1403$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$) showed a value above the generally accepted limit of .70 for Cronbach's α (DeVellis, 2016). This high α allowed us to calculate a single European citizenship score for every participant by averaging the scores within the scale.

In addition to the standard scales, we included two variables specifically designed to measure European Youth Strategy awareness and participation. These variables were adapted from the consultation dialogue questionnaire used in its 2019-2027 version development (European Commission, 2018). The questions were as follows:

- European Youth Strategy awareness (SCT environment): Were you aware (before participating in the eSAT project) that the EU is active in youth policy, through the EU Youth Strategy? (Possible answers: Yes = 1 / No = 0), and
- EU participation (SCT behavior): 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 programs (Youth in Action until 2013, Erasmus+ youth since 2014)? (Possible answers: Yes = 1 / No = 0 / I don't know = -1) (Adapted from European Commission, 2017a).

We reviewed the validity of our data collection instrument to ensure its alignment with the European citizenship construct. Subsequently, we confirmed its reliability using Cronbach's α . Testing the internal consistency of the European citizenship Scale ($n=1403$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$) showed a value above the generally accepted limit of .70 for Cronbach's α (DeVellis, 2016). Reliability tests were also conducted separately for each country, with Cronbach's α values ranging from $\alpha = .85$ to $\alpha = .89$ across Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. These high values permitted us to confidently calculate a single European citizenship score for every participant by averaging the scores within the scale.

Analytical techniques

Our analyses utilized a range of statistical techniques designed to address the research hypotheses and evaluate the intervention's impact. Before conducting hypothesis testing, we ensured that the data met the assumptions for parametric tests. Once these assumptions were met, we proceeded with the main statistical tests. We first calculated descriptive statistics for the key variables. Descriptive statistics were presented, including means and standard deviations. They provided an overview of the data and helped contextualize the hypotheses testing results.

Acknowledging that different teams implemented the study intervention in each participating country, we also assessed whether there were any differences between the four countries. For this purpose, we used a MANOVA (Multivariate Analysis of Variance) tests. We also conducted MANOVA to assess for potential differences between participants in each country's Intervention and Control groups on their European Youth Strategy awareness and EU participation. Finally, we investigated whether the current study intervention produced a statistically significant difference in the European citizenship scores of the Intervention participants compared to the Control group. We used independent-samples t-tests, analyzing the data from each country separately. The results are presented in turn.

Results

We analyzed the data using SPSS Statistics 28 to test the hypotheses related to European citizenship self-perception, European Youth Strategy awareness, and EU participation. Including mandatory closed questions guaranteed the absence of invalid or missing data. Various statistical methods were applied, ensuring that the assumptions required for these analyses were met. The analysis focused on testing the research hypotheses, with assumption checks like normality and homogeneity integrated into the process.

Assumption testing

Before conducting the main statistical analyses, we tested for key assumptions necessary for parametric tests, such as normality, homogeneity of variances, and multicollinearity. European citizenship scores for skewness and kurtosis fell within the accepted -2 to 2 range (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Additionally, all Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests were not significant, except for the one in Bulgaria. Following the guidance provided by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), we conducted

visual examinations of histograms, boxplots, and Q-Q plots to evaluate data normality further. The histograms exhibited bell-shaped curves, indicating a normal distribution. Additionally, the boxplots and Q-Q plots further supported the normality assumption. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances confirmed equal variances between the two groups, satisfying the homogeneity assumption. No significant multicollinearity was detected, either. As a result, we were confident in applying parametric tests.

Descriptive statistics

The study's descriptive statistics provide an overview of employed items across the four participating countries: Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. We explored the whole sample of 1,403 participants, as well as country-level data. The results revealed notable differences across countries in various aspects (see Table 1).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics.

Measure		Bulgaria (n=334)		Hungary (n=256)		Romania (n=392)		Slovakia (n=421)		Total (n=1,403)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
European competence	Social responsibility	2.74	.52	2.92	.57	2.80	.59	2.72	.54	2.78	.56
	Self-awareness	2.75	.88	2.97	.73	2.72	.81	2.66	.81	2.76	.82
	Intercultural communication	2.75	.88	2.97	.73	2.72	.81	2.66	.81	2.76	.82
	Global knowledge	3.03	.89	3.29	.82	2.98	.93	2.83	.87	3.01	.89
European civic engagement	Involvement in civic organisations	2.23	.88	2.63	.96	2.48	.99	2.16	.89	2.35	.94
	Political voice	1.96	.91	2.28	.94	2.05	.98	1.88	.92	2.02	.95
	Global civic activism	3.25	.91	3.22	.97	3.14	.87	3.12	.92	3.18	.91
European Citizenship		2.67	.57	2.90	.54	2.70	.60	2.58	.53	2.69	.57
EU participation		.25	.44	.18	.38	.22	.42	.11	.31	.19	.39
European Youth Strategy awareness		.40	.49	.52	.50	.49	.50	.33	.47	.43	.49

Table 1 clearly shows the existence of regional differences, with Hungarian participants generally reporting higher scores across most variables, such as self-awareness ($M = 2.97$, $SD = .73$) and global knowledge ($M = 3.29$, $SD = .82$). Conversely, Slovaks consistently showed lower averages,

particularly in political voice ($M = 1.88$, $SD = .92$) and EU participation ($M = .33$, $SD = .47$). Romanian and Bulgarian demonstrated more moderate, also comparable trends across most variables with two exceptions. One exception was global activism ($M = 3.18$, $SD = .91$), where all countries' participants reported higher average scores with Bulgarians having the highest ($M = 3.25$, $SD = .91$). Hungarians had a mean of 3.22 ($SD = .97$), Romanians – 3.14 ($SD = .87$) and Slovaks – 3.12 ($SD = .92$). The other was EU participation ($M = .19$, $SD = .39$), where Bulgaria had the highest proportion of participants reporting having been involved in EU activities ($M = .26$, $SD = .44$), while Slovakia showed the lowest engagement at .11 ($SD = .31$). Hungary and Romania had more moderate average participation rates of .18 ($SD = .38$) and .22 ($SD = .42$), respectively.

Hypotheses testing

Following from the presented differences in descriptive statistics, first, we assessed whether there were significant differences between the participating countries. For this purpose, we used a MANOVA with "country" being an IV (independent variable). DVs (dependent variables) were the participants' overall European citizenship scores, European Youth Strategy awareness and EU participation. An $F(9, 3400) = 15.418$ ($p < .001$, Wilks' Lambda = .907, partial eta squared = .032) indicated statistically significant differences on the DVs among the four countries. As a result, we proceeded to conduct separate analyses of each country's data.

Through further MANOVAs, we assessed for potential differences between participants in each country's Intervention and Control groups on their European Youth Strategy variables. The IV was the group condition, either Intervention or Control, while the DVs were European Youth Strategy awareness and EU participation. The results indicated no statistically significant differences between the two groups in the cases of Bulgaria (Wilks' Lambda = .996, $F(2, 331) = .717$, $p = .50$, $\eta^2 = .004$), Romania (Wilks' Lambda = .998, $F(2, 389) = .438$, $p = .65$, $\eta^2 = .002$) and Slovakia (Wilks' Lambda = .993, $F(2, 418) = 1.486$, $p = .23$, $\eta^2 = .007$). An indication of difference was found in Hungary (Wilks' Lambda = .969, $F(2, 253) = 4.011$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .031$). When the results for the Hungarian DVs were considered separately, the only difference to reach statistical significance was EU participation, $F(1, 254) = 4.464$, $p = .036$, partial eta squared = .017. An inspection of the mean scores indicated that a larger proportion of the Control participants reported

not knowing whether they had EU participation ($M = -.26$, $SD = .61$) than the Intervention participants ($M = -.04$, $SD = .66$).

Subsequently, we proceeded to test our H1 using independent-samples t-tests. In particular, we investigated whether the current study intervention produced a statistically significant difference in the European citizenship scores of the Intervention participants as compared to the Control group. For each country, Table 2 shows the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), degrees of freedom (df), t-value (t), p-value (p), and effect size (Cohen's d). The means reflect the average European citizenship scores in both groups and the standard deviations represent the variability of those scores. A t-value indicates the magnitude and direction of the difference between the groups, with a p-value showing whether this difference is statistically significant (typically $p < .05$). Cohen's d is used to measure the effect size, with values around .2 considered small, .5 medium, and .8 large.

Table 2

Differences in European Citizenship Self-perception between the Intervention and Control Groups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.

		Intervention			Control			df	t	p	Cohen's d
		n	M	SD	n	M	SD				
Bulgaria	All	206	2.60	.56	128	2.78	.56	332	-2.83	.005	-.319
	Males	66	2.56	.51	42	2.76	.64	106	-1.80	.075	-.355
	Females	139	2.63	.58	80	2.78	.52	217	-1.95	.053	-.273
Hungary	All	210	2.92	.54	46	2.78	.49	254	1.57	.118	.277
	Males	86	2.84	.67	18	2.88	.54	102	-.20	.838	-.053
	Females	119	2.97	.52	27	2.75	.44	144	2.06	.042	.438
Romania	All	205	2.72	.57	187	2.68	.64	390	.69	.492	.070
	Males	95	2.77	.55	79	2.67	.58	172	1.10	.271	.168
	Females	103	2.66	.59	108	2.68	.68	209	-.28	.829	-.030
Slovakia	All	203	2.64	.53	218	2.52	.52	419	2.20	.014	.214
	Males	76	2.57	.49	130	2.56	.51	204	.23	.816	.034
	Females	112	2.65	.48	76	2.47	.52	186	2.36	.019	.351

* Participants who did not disclose their gender are included in the overall analyses but could not be analyzed separately due to their low numbers.

Table 2 reveals no significant difference in European citizenship scores for Intervention and Control participants in Hungary and Romania, meaning the intervention did not affect citizenship

scores in those countries. Differences are notable in the cases of Bulgaria and Slovakia. In Bulgaria, the mean European citizenship score for the Intervention group ($M = 2.60$) was significantly lower than that of the Control group ($M = 2.78$), with a t -value of -2.83 and a p -value of $.005$, indicating that the Intervention group reported lower European citizenship self-perception. This finding contrasts with Slovakia, where the Intervention group had a higher mean score ($M = 2.64$) compared to the Control group ($M = 2.52$), and the difference was statistically significant ($p = .014$). The effect sizes in both countries (Cohen's $d = -.319$ in Bulgaria and $.214$ in Slovakia) suggest a small to medium effect. Thus, H1 (see Research question and hypothesis) was partially supported only in Slovakia's case.

After partially confirming H1, we proceeded with assessing H2. H2 hypothesized that males and females would respond differently to the intervention, so we conducted separate analyses by gender. In Romania, the results remained consistently insignificant for both males and females, indicating that the intervention had no observable effect on European citizenship scores regardless of gender. For Bulgaria, when the data was split by gender, the previously significant difference in overall European citizenship scores disappeared. Males in the Bulgarian Intervention group ($M = 2.56$, $SD = .51$) had slightly lower average scores than females ($M = 2.63$, $SD = .58$). Still, neither difference reached statistical significance, with t -values of -1.80 ($p = .075$) for males and -1.95 ($p = .053$) for females. This result suggests that, in Bulgaria, the gender-specific intervention effects were minimal and not strong enough to support H2.

In contrast, significant gender differences emerged in Slovakia and Hungary. In both countries, females in the Intervention group scored significantly higher on European citizenship self-perception than their Control group peers. In Slovakia, females in the Intervention group ($M = 2.65$, $SD = .48$) reported higher scores than those in the Control group ($M = 2.47$, $SD = .52$), with a t -value of 2.36 ($p = .019$) and a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = .351$). Similarly, in Hungary, females in the Intervention group ($M = 2.97$, $SD = .52$) scored higher than females in the Control group ($M = 2.75$, $SD = .44$), with a t -value of 2.06 ($p = .042$) and a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = .438$). These results indicate a positive and statistically significant impact of the intervention for females in both countries, suggesting that the intervention was more effective in enhancing European citizenship perceptions among females.

At the same time, males in both Slovakia and Hungary showed no statistically significant differences between the Intervention and Control groups, with comparable scores and non-significant p-values ($p > .05$). For instance, in Slovakia, males in the Intervention group ($M = 2.57$, $SD = .49$) and the Control group ($M = 2.56$, $SD = .51$) had nearly identical scores, resulting in a t-value of .23 ($p = .816$) and negligible effect size (Cohen's $d = .034$). A similar pattern was observed in Hungary, where males in the Intervention group ($M = 2.84$, $SD = .67$) and the Control group ($M = 2.88$, $SD = .54$) had no significant differences ($t = -.20$, $p = .838$, Cohen's $d = -.053$).

Overall, these results suggest that H2 was only partially supported. While the intervention appeared to significantly affect European citizenship scores for females in Slovakia and Hungary, no such effect was found for males in either country. This gender-specific response highlights the importance of considering gender dynamics in future interventions promoting European citizenship.

Assessing for H1 and H2 was aimed at answering our research question, i.e. what impact does an intervention focused on raising awareness about the European Youth Strategy as part of an EU project have on the project participants' European citizenship self-perceptions, our analyses showed that while the intervention had some success, it was not universally effective. These mixed results are explored in the following discussion.

Discussion

In answering our research question, our study evaluated whether young people's European citizenship self-perception was influenced by a targeted intervention designed to impact their environment and behavior (Bandura, 1986). We impacted the target group environment by raising their awareness about the European Youth Strategy. This impact took place in the framework of an EU project, thus influencing their behavior by providing them with an opportunity for EU participation. After the intervention, we adapted the Global Citizenship Scale (Morais & Ogden, 2011) to measure their European citizenship self-perception. Our research was grounded in SCT (Bandura, 1986) and spanned a period from July to December 2023. The study utilized data from a cohort of 1403 young Europeans from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia to explore the two study hypotheses.

H1 predicted that the intervention would lead to higher European citizenship scores in the Intervention group compared to the Control group. Similar to Borz et al. (2022), who found that EU policy interventions can influence European identity, our results indicated mixed outcomes across countries, partially supporting H1. In Slovakia, the intervention had a statistically significant positive effect on European citizenship scores, confirming H1 in this context. Slovak Intervention group participants reported higher self-perceptions of European citizenship than their Control group peers. This result aligns with previous findings suggesting that structured EU initiatives can foster a sense of European identity (Santana-Vega et al., 2021). In contrast, H1 was rejected in Romania and Hungary, where no significant difference was found between the Intervention and Control groups. These results align with research by Bauhr and Charron (2023), which suggests that regional and contextual factors, such as governance quality, may moderate the effectiveness of citizenship interventions, possibly explaining the lack of impact in these countries.

Interestingly, the results in Bulgaria showed a negative effect, with Intervention participants reporting lower European citizenship scores than the Control group. Although the immediate response to such a result may be negative, it can also be attributed to the amount and quality of new knowledge obtained by the Bulgarian participants due to the intervention, which might have expanded their cognitive horizons. According to SCT (Bandura, 1986), an individual's belief in their capacity to accomplish tasks and achieve goals is a dynamic construct. For example, while gaining more knowledge or information, there might be scenarios where self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and self-control could diminish. This effect could occur when individuals discover greater complexity in a task than previously realized, consider unforeseen obstacles that challenge their confidence, observe others' higher levels of proficiency leading to self-comparisons, receive negative peer feedback or experience failures despite increased knowledge. In our case, the newfound information might have influenced their European citizenship, potentially leading to decreased self-perception despite the interventions' efforts to enhance their knowledge and experience. This finding aligns with Kaase's (1999) on how increased exposure to political complexity can lower initial civic engagement.

H2 posited that males and females would respond differently to the intervention. This hypothesis was also partially supported. In both Slovakia and Hungary, females in the Intervention group exhibited significantly higher European citizenship scores than females in the Control group,

confirming H2 in these countries. Previous research suggests females may engage more positively with citizenship and civic education programs (Allaste et al., 2022), which could explain why they were more receptive to the intervention. The Slovak data showed that this effect was strong enough to support H1 as well, indicating that the intervention was particularly effective among female participants in Slovakia.

Conversely, in Romania and Bulgaria, no significant gender differences were found, with neither males nor females showing significant changes in European citizenship scores. This null effect is consistent with findings from other studies, such as those by Stangenberger and Formánková (2023), which suggest that cultural and socio-political contexts play a significant role in determining the impact of citizenship education programs. In Bulgaria, while the overall effect of the intervention was negative, further analysis revealed that the significance of the negative impact disappeared when data was analyzed separately by gender. This result could suggest that gender-specific responses were present but obscured by the broader data set, highlighting the importance of nuanced analysis when evaluating interventions (Hetherington, 2005).

Overall, our findings offer practical insights. Those insights can guide the creation of future effective interventions and policies to expand the achieved influence or deliver such where it was not found. By studying the youth populations of four countries, we uncovered nuanced cultural and gender differences, contributing to a deeper understanding that transcends individual contexts. Ultimately, our analysis provides valuable data to expand the limited literature on the European Youth Strategy tools' influence on youth European citizenship perceptions.

Future research

With our results, researchers and practitioners are better positioned to develop strategies, campaigns, and interventions focusing on the specific construct of European citizenship. Tailoring these initiatives to suit the unique needs and attributes discerned within the contexts of the countries in question is crucial. Moreover, conducting further evaluations of the impacts of these efforts over time is essential to better gauge their efficacy.

Strengths and limitations

Although European policies typically form the basis for local, regional, and national strategies, our research acknowledged the unique EU Member States' diversity. This diversity highlights the

potential disparity in outcomes when employing uniform strategies across varied contexts. Consequently, our study offers valuable insights to advocate adopting customized approaches to enhance European citizenship within the countries examined.

We developed this study to assess a European citizenship intervention. The study was conducted as an ex-post quasi-experiment with convenience Intervention and Control groups, which spanned four countries. The intervention was delivered in person. Despite such interventions being widely encouraged and supported (European Commission, 2018, 2023), data-driven, theoretically grounded evidence about their effect seems missing. This limited knowledge underscores the unique contribution of this study.

To enhance the study's generalizability, we gathered data from a large sample of young Europeans ($n=1403$). Moreover, the study benefitted from a balanced gender distribution in the sample: 55% female, 42% male, and 3% undisclosed. Finally, the study's inclusion of a well-established Control group allowed for the mitigation of potential biases arising from external factors experienced by participants in the Intervention group outside the study's scope.

Along with its strengths, our study is not without its limitations. The use of self-reported data typically introduces the possibility of bias, a concern mitigated by employing anonymous data collection methods to ensure participants felt no pressure to provide socially acceptable responses. Moreover, since European citizenship is not typically associated with social stigma, concerns about biased reporting were minimal. Another limitation is the study's single point of data collection. Although this approach eliminated the drop-out risk (see Research design), an ex-ante/ex-post design would have provided more confidence in our findings. It would have further helped account for any factors that might have existed before the intervention in either group or country. Consequently, more research is essential to unveil other hidden dynamics and deepen our understanding of the complexities involved.

Despite these limitations, our study contributes significantly to understanding European citizenship. For instance, we shed light on how an SCT-grounded intervention influenced the perceptions of European citizenship among European youth. Building on the notion that European citizenship embodies interconnected participatory and psychological dimensions (Šerek & Jugert, 2018), our study offers a unique quantitative perspective that, unfortunately, lacks precedence in

the existing literature. While prior works engage with our topic more as a discussion (Anders, 2023; Karolewski, 2023; Kirtzel & Lorenz, 2023), our study leveraged fresh survey data to conduct statistical tests. This approach provided a nuanced assessment of the practical implications of influencing young people's environment and behavior, setting the stage for future research directions.

Conclusion

The current study offers insights into the impact of an intervention focused on raising awareness about the European Youth Strategy as part of an EU project on the participants' European citizenship self-perceptions. Through independent-samples t-tests, we investigated its influence in different country samples. The findings indicated mixed results, from positive in Slovakia through null in Hungary and Romania to negative in Bulgaria. However, females generally responded more positively to the intervention than males, albeit only in Hungary and Slovakia. These results provide valuable guidance for shaping future policies and interventions, serving as comparison data for evaluating their effectiveness.

In summary, our findings, grounded in the Social Cognitive Theory, contribute to a nuanced understanding of the impact influencing environment and behavior may have on personality. They are concerned with European citizenship self-perception within diverse European contexts. The importance of thorough intervention considerations of the specific socio-cultural nuances of each country emerges as a key takeaway for promoting European citizenship and engaging with the European Youth Strategy effectively. More research, leveraging other research designs, could deepen our insights into these intricate dynamics.

Acknowledgement

This article is an output of the "The European youth Strategy delivered through Advanced Technologies" (eSAT) project, implemented with the support of the European Union Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). The article reflects the views only of its authors, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

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