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## **Temporality and historical experience in attitudes towards Europe: Is there a nationality effect?**

Dorota Dakowska, Jay Rowell

The date of accession to the EU, and more specifically the distinction between ‘new’ and ‘old’ member states is one of the categories often used by experts and ordinary citizens to understand Europe. These evaluative categories are part of a wider series of geographical, historical and cultural divisions used to reflect the diversity and cleavages that run through Europe: ‘Northern’, ‘Southern’, ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ countries; ‘big’ and ‘small’ ones; those who have experienced a recent democratic transition as well as older democracies. These frames have provided a set of ready-made explanations available to scholars and ordinary citizens. For the latter, such categories are often used to situate national identities in the time and space of the EU. Scholars mobilise these categories in more or less elaborate forms to explain the dynamics and cleavages within the EU as well as differences in national public opinions with regard to the EU.

The analysis of attitudes and opinions can be broadly divided into two approaches. The first one tends to explain them in terms of sociological variables that link positions, properties and social paths to attitudes, without taking national context into account as a pertinent variable. The second one considers national context to be determinant when it comes to explaining, classifying and comparing attitudes. There is little disagreement that categories associated with the national level – whether through collective historical experience, language, education, or the mobilisation of discourses on the Nation in the political or media spaces – have an impact on judgements on Europe. However, the question of the relative importance of the ‘national’ variable compared to others remains a subject of much debate. In dealing with these aspects, the scientific literature has often focused on the compatibility or the mutual exclusion of European, national or sub-national identities (Schild 2001; Duchesne, Frogner 2002; Bruter 2005; Checkel, Katzenstein 2009). Going little further than

statistical correlations, this literature does not satisfactorily explain the way in which individuals mobilise (or not) national categories and references when attempting to give a meaning to an abstract object such as the EU. Others mobilise history or national culture in a selective and *ad hoc* manner to account for differences observed between national samples. They explain such differences by inferring an effect of the number of years of membership in the EU, and by assuming that certain historical experiences or political cultures are more or less compatible with the form and the values of the European project. In this case, history and culture are explanatory variables, mobilised by drawing selectively on a pre-existing stock of characteristics that supposedly contribute to a specific national political culture (for example, the attachment to parliamentarism in Britain, the importance of the idea of the ‘greatness’ of the French nation, etc.). These approaches, which tend to reify national cultures, often rely on a shaky empirical foundation in the explanation of statistical correlations. They do not tell us why a particular cultural trait or historical event becomes ‘active’ in structuring opinions and why certain explicative elements are chosen over others within the available stock of cultural or historical characteristics associated with a particular nation.

Our approach does not aim to determine whether the sociological or the national context is more important in structuring attitudes toward Europe. More modestly, we will analyse, on the one hand, how historical references and nationally defined cognitive frames are mobilised in discourses on Europe in various national contexts, and on the other hand, how the mobilisation of these references varies from one social group to another. More precisely, we will examine how collective experiences such as war, communism, democratic and economic transitions – or cognitive categories that are more or less specific to a national context – are reproduced, understood and integrated (or not) in opinions on Europe. With such an inductive and somewhat experimental approach, we cannot address the binary and often simplistic hypotheses that structure many studies of opinions (are identities exclusive or compatible; does the length of EU membership favour a positive assessment of the European project or not? etc.). Instead, based on empirical materials and the comparison of argumentative chains, we will explore how national collective experiences are mobilised, and by whom. Thus, rather than considering national context as a factor that produces uniform effects on all individuals socialised within its framework, we will focus on how the past (European, national or individual) elicits socially differentiated forms of appropriation.

By comparing Poland, a recent member state, and Germany, which is both a founding member of the Community and a newer member – if we take into account the effective accession of the former German Democratic Republic in 1990 – we have a sample that is conducive to answering our questions. In Germany, European integration was the object of a large political and elite consensus: the difficulty to express a positive attachment to the nation is presumed to have facilitated identification to a post-national, therefore mainly European substitute identity (Risse 2004). Beyond the case of Germany, the Second World War, an experience shared all over the European continent, was presented both as one of the matrixes and one of the main legitimising elements of European construction. Thus, through a Germano-Polish comparison, we will try to see how this common historical experience is mobilised in discourses on Europe.

Ever since the fall of the Berlin wall and the integration of former countries of the Soviet bloc, communism has no longer been an alternative to market capitalism and European integration. At the same time, as a historical experience, memory and heritage, the forty years of communist rule have had a very strong impact on Poland and on the former GDR. It is more particularly through the comparison between Polish and East German samples as well as the two German samples that we can try to find out what appears specific or common in the way of mobilising references to communism and how these references are combined with other knowledge and experiences.

Beyond the analysis of the effects of ‘social frames of memory’ (Halbwachs) linked to previous regimes and events, we will also seek to question more recent political, economic and social temporalities present in discourse on Europe. The perception of the EU through the prism of the recent accession process is arguably a specific feature of attitudes of citizens of post-Communist member states in Central and Eastern Europe. In these countries, the perceptions of the accession process and that of the systemic transitions which have taken place since 1989 often converge (Gora 2002; Medrano 2003; Bielasiak 2002). Accordingly, the second part extends the comparison to examine references to systemic reforms in the two countries in the 1990s and how they are linked to EU membership. These reforms took place at the time of accession (in the case of the new Länder) or before the accession to the EU (Poland). Several quantitative studies indicate the existence of a strong correlation between the duration of a country’s EU membership and popular support for European integration (Anderson, Kaltenthaler 1996). Survey results are used to defend this observation, whereas

deviations from the ‘norm’ are interpreted using *ad hoc* arguments such as democratic experience or being a net contributor state to Community budget (Scheuer, Van der Brug 2007).

In addition to the normative dimension of these hypotheses (which amount to claiming ‘the more you are exposed to Europe, the more you know it and the more you like it’), the comparison between national contexts shows the fragility of these interpretations. Instead of considering the number of years of membership as a structuring factor in itself, we will study the occurrence and the modalities of the references – direct or indirect – to this temporality. In contexts where EU membership appears as a relatively recent social reality, references to earlier periods and to the immediate consequences of European enlargement allow us to put into perspective, or even question two dominant interpretations of the effects of the length of membership: that the date of accession, in other words a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ EU membership is important to the evaluation – positive or negative – of EU membership; that the length of membership, often interpreted as a proxy to the length of exposure to – and knowledge of – the EU, plays a significant role in structuring opinions.

### **Giving meaning to Europe through historical references**

The triangular relationship between History, the idea of the Nation and identification to Europe is one of the cornerstones of culturalist explanations of different relationships to the EU (Medrano 2003, Risse 2004, Schmidt 2007, Harmsen 2007). It is commonly assumed that from the German point of view, European construction is a way towards the country’s redemption after a troubled past and an alternative to nationalism. In Poland, as in other post-communist countries, the accession to the EU was considered as a return to Europe, as a way of normalising a historical path that was brutally deviated in 1945. In order to explain the ‘Euro-scepticism’ that is common in new member states, the arguments of recent socialisation to Europe or the persistent predominance of ‘socialist values’ are often put forward (Rohrschneider, Whitefield 2006).

One of the most stimulating and ambitious attempts to understand the impact of national context on opinions in a comparative framework is Juan Diez Medrano’s *Framing Europe* (2003). Starting from relatively simple observations – Europe is discussed in very different ways from one country to the next, language and salient issues vary – the author reconstructs, based on a corpus of interviews, the social frames specific to different countries. These frames are analyzed as the expression of shared

historical memory. This approach aims to explain differences in attitudes towards European integration which are very imperfectly covered by quantitative methods. While the method used for this study is innovative, it relies on a sample that is essentially composed of highly educated individuals, respondents who are politicised or who have political responsibilities. In other words this population is professionally and socially predisposed to mobilise historical references in a very well articulated discourse on Europe. These biases lead the author to generalise a specific type of European representation to an entire society, as if, for instance, all German citizens were concerned by intellectual debates on the past such as the *Historikerstreit*. This does not necessarily imply that historical references are not present in other segments of the population, but this is precisely one of the questions we seek to examine more closely. By introducing a historical dimension in the analysis, this tradition of historical culturalism has raised a certain number of key questions concerning the determinants of public opinions which are outside the scope of quantitative research traditions. While they lead to a more complex interpretation of the effects of national contexts on discourse, they tend to treat national populations as an undifferentiated entity and posit the existence of a historical framework producing homogenous effects on the entire population.

We will study below the forms, the intensity and the articulation of two historical moments frequently mobilised by scholars and experts in media and political spaces: the Second World War and Communism. In our corpus, the number of occurrences and the degree of sophistication of these references vary. While there are specific interpretations from one country to another and from one social group to another, the reference to these historical experiences works more as a resource or a repertoire to make sense of an abstract political reality than as a framework linking national and European levels. Moreover, this repertoire is unequally accessible to citizens of different categories.

### ***Talking about war, talking about Europe***

Whereas interviewees who are most endowed with academic capital use historical references that go back as far as the Antiquity in order to justify the existence of the European continent's cultural foundations, discourses that are more specifically linked to the political project of the EU mostly rely on twentieth century historical references. References to the Second World War are unsurprisingly frequent, since the European Union's pacifying role was one of the cornerstones of its legitimisation.

This reference is used differently in Poland than in our samples in France, Italy and Germany, as the end of the war is not associated with reconciliation but rather with the division of the continent. In both Germany and Poland, this resource can take several forms: direct personal experience, reference to family history, or a more academic or intellectual comprehension that reproduces debates on national history and tries to tie these debates into justifications of a positive – or sometimes negative – evaluation of the European project.

While direct or indirect references to the Second World War are present in a majority of interviews from the German corpus, their weight and centrality in evaluations of the EU vary according to the level of political competence. It is indeed amongst interviewees with a synoptic vision or those who are relatively well informed about Europe that the war and the role of the EEC in pacifying the continent are mentioned. For instance, a young German interviewee who holds a university degree in Political Science and works in an association financed by the European Social Fund, expresses a quasi ‘official’ vision of national history:

‘I think it’s a good thing that Germany is a member of the European Union. ... For several reasons; the fact that we are doing our job well .... For historical reasons also. ... It’s the history of Germany and the Second World War and the post-Second World War period. That is how Germany ... was quickly integrated in the Community of Nations. And Germany was one of the founder states. That is a good thing!’

While others refer to this past, it is rather as a memory from school lessons that can be significant in very specific contexts. When answering the question on his feelings on being ‘German in Europe’, this high school student, who shows an uncritical and distant attitude, tells the interviewer about a school trip to Auschwitz – a stark reminder of the shameful national past:

To be honest, I’ve always had good experiences. ... In other countries it happens because of our history... some people can say things. But I can deal with it. Of course I remember when we were at Auschwitz for example... we all felt a bit weird at the time. It was a strange situation. Everybody was looking at us .... Well, something happened in the past, and we are living fifty years later. So they can’t really say it’s our fault... in short, I feel good. I don’t have any problem saying, ‘I am German’.

In response to the question on positive or negative aspects of Germany's membership in the EU, a 66-year-old retired farmer, who went to university in the United States and who is very interested in politics answers with a reasoning that reflects many official discourses on the importance of binding Germany into Europe and the Western alliance:

It is a very good thing... [he laughs]. Because I think that Germans have a tendency to, how can I put this, to solve their problems using violence. It might not be the case today because things are going well and all that, you know, the economy is doing well... but I think if one day things changed, people would be tempted to look for scapegoats. I don't know, maybe the Turkish, or others, like the Russian-Germans, all those people who are not very well liked, and then they would abuse them pretty badly. And I think the fact that we are in the EU prevents that.

In Germany, references to the war are often absent from the discourses of people who do not have a high level of political competence, except for those who have experienced it first-hand. 'I think Europe is very important to avoid wars and conflicts and the like. It is really a blessing, isn't it, the fact that we are now so interdependent' (West Germany, M, 85, retired low-level civil servant). But such a direct link between war and the European project is rarely established, even amongst interviewees born before 1935. We find few explicit references to a substitute European identification in lieu of a German identity assumed to be problematic. Even most of the enthusiastic supporters of Europe have little hesitation in declaring that they feel first and foremost German when at home or abroad. Conversely, some well-informed interviewees do not hesitate to criticise the manipulation of the German nation's feeling of guilt by other countries that limits, according to them, the capacity of German authorities to assert legitimate national interests.

- So, if I understand you well, they should have waited a little for the enlargement to the East...

- Yes.

- For how long?

- I can't say, I haven't given that much thought to this question, but we've had negative experiences with the German unification, when they just went 'we are opening the borders and everything will be fine'. This wasn't the way to go about it. And I am afraid we have for some reasons, even for historical reasons, because Merkel made a promise to Kaczynski saying, 'It's okay, you can come in' because of the Second World War taboos, I'm afraid we have shown a lack of objectivity on the issue'.



However, according to some Polish interviewees, when associated with wars, Europe elicits negative reactions. Contrary to the German case, references to wars are not necessarily made by the most educated interviewees, but rather by people with intermediary positions, who in some cases fell on hard times after 1990. In our sample, these individuals tend to be older and to support views similar to those of conservative or far-right parties, in the discourse of which distrust towards Germany is a key element.

- The word Europe, without anything else?

- Yes, Europe.

- Well, Europe is a continent.

- Do you have rather positive or negative associations?

- Rather negative, if we look at it from a historical point of view.

- And apart from that?

- World wars or other calamities. The French and the October revolutions... You'd have thought Europe was one of the most civilised continents and that these kinds of things wouldn't happen, but they did.

(Poland, M, 58, municipal employee in a mid-sized town, secondary school educational level, member of the Law and Justice conservative party)

However, such negative references are also made by younger interviewees, such as this 23-year-old shopkeeper, holder of a community college degree. He lives in a village in the Eastern part of the country with his grandfather, who is very critical of the EU and Polish governments.

- Do you have negative associations in relation to the Union?

- In relation to the Union, no. But in relation to Europe, Yes.

- Meaning?

- About Germany.

- What about Germany?

- Hitler started the war and they are richer than us. They should have been poorer since they lost the war.

Though it is not explicitly mentioned, the Second World War sometimes appears to be an implicit

justification for interviewees who wish that the EU would have a more active role in settling armed conflicts. The Balkan war and the ethnic cleansing have left permanent marks in discourses of many German interviewees from middle and upper classes. Such marks are much less visible in Poland. These interviewees also mention the Iraq war to show the need for a more affirmed foreign and military policy that could counterweigh the United States.

For example, I'm so afraid of the US, with all their...their power and their... I mean what could happen. When I think of what could happen, I'm afraid, yes... So I think, with all the wars they have experienced, Europeans are more careful, have more restraint, right?

(West Germany, F, 52, university degree holder, housewife)

All in all, the mobilisation – direct or indirect – of historical references to produce an evaluative discourse on Europe remains mostly limited to the segments of the population that are more politicised or more endowed with cultural capital. Whereas the role of European construction in pacifying the continent is sometimes mentioned, in passing and as something self-evident, interviewees tend to give more in-depth answers related to modern-day threats (wars in Iran and Iraq, cross-border criminality or immigration...). In Germany, the current wars, the role of the nation and of the EU are most of the time implicitly linked to the Second World War. In Poland, this reference to the war is overshadowed by references to the Communist past which structures the perception of threats and, in a general manner, judgements made on the country's evolution – or the interviewees' own situation – during the last twenty years.

### ***References to communism: an ever present past?***

In an interview chiefly focused on contemporary European questions, in what terms and with which socio-professional categories do references to the period of communism surface, in the Polish and East German cases? For a number of Polish interviewees, the communist past appears between the lines, as a counterpoint to the positive associations linked with accession. The EU is seen as an economically developed space, full of opportunities (work, travelling) and associated with modern technology. These positive associations are in contradiction with what is said about the former regime, which is considered as authoritarian and preventing freedom of movement (all categories mention this) and freedom to conduct a business (this is mentioned by private sector and independent

workers). The communist past is associated with food shortages, queues and products of poor quality. The access to consumer goods and their quality during the period of communism are not mentioned in Eastern German interviews, but freedom of travel comes up systematically. On the other hand, mass access to western goods tends to be associated with the German unification and the introduction of the Deutschmark rather than with the simultaneous accession to the EU.

Communism is associated with cumbersome border controls by people who have experienced them or by those who were not able to obtain passports or visas: thus, freedom of movement as a practical experience of Europe is central to positive evaluations of the EU. This is the most frequent argument given by Polish interviewees, regardless of socio-professional category when they discuss their positive associations with Europe. While many interviewees have experience of trips abroad (tourism, trade, seasonal work, buying a used car...), others who have never left their country emphasise this point, almost as if they were speaking by proxy ('young people can travel'). Mentioning the communist period serves as a counterpoint to talk about these new rights, perceived as a return to 'normalcy'. For instance, a 53-year-old Polish worker in a major steel factory makes numerous critical references to the communist past, with an emphasis on how hard it was to go abroad. He opposes the past – 'when we were second-class citizens' – to the present: 'we feel like normal Europeans and we want to be treated normally'. Such interviewees want to enjoy the same rights and freedoms as Western citizens, but also often fear that Polish citizens will have an inferior status within the EU.

The question of freedom of movement is indeed also more present in interviews with East Germans than West Germans, except for interviewees who live close to the borders. The separation of the two German States, which tore apart many families, made the strict restrictions on the GDR exit visas a particularly controversial subject. In the interviews, the image of confinement, the feeling of having been imprisoned within the borders of one's own country in the past keeps coming up and freedom of movement, facilitated by the adoption of the euro, is credited to the EU.

Freedom of movement, which East Germans have enjoyed since 1989, is perceived through personal experience – encounters with other individuals and cultures, understood as forms of a 'bottom-up' construction of Europe. But on the question of freedom of movement, seen through the prism of past

experience, judgements remain ambivalent. Often, this first positive – and spontaneous – judgement, formulated in reference to periods ‘before’ and ‘after’ Unification, is qualified by a more nuanced opinion on the present or potential future impacts of freedom of movement. With this shift in judgement, the argumentative register drastically changes, from personal experiences linked to history to a more abstract and impersonal analysis of economic or security risks associated with immigration, organised crime, business relocations or wage pressure from immigrants, particularly from Eastern Europe.

Polish interviewees refer to the collective experience of communism but also, in a general manner, to a more distant past, and draw parallels between the EU and imperial regimes. Occasionally, this perception of the EU as an empire is not only expressed in critical terms. A retired psychologist, born in 1910, underlines a similarity with the Austro-Hungarian Empire: ‘I didn’t see any reasons to stay out of the Union. I liked the very idea of the European Union. I knew what the Union was all about, since the Austrian Empire was a similar Union, wasn’t it?’ A more frequent cognitive short cut is established between Community constraints and the Soviet rule in Poland (but also in the Czech corpus), built upon the vision of an external power: ‘We used to make fun of Communism, of their absurd laws, of their ukases, the injunctions, but with the Union, it’s the same thing now’ (Poland, M, 48, worker). This parallel is sometimes influenced by anti-accession movements, which during the pre-accession period popularised slogans such as: ‘Yesterday Moscow, Brussels today’. Declarations from some political leaders have fuelled this type of discourse. The implicit reference to periods of domination by outside powers is recurrent when expressing the fear of seeing Poland exploited (‘We’re like Cinderella’) and of letting powerful European states make decisions for them (‘Germany and Britain are making the rules for us’). The parallel with the USSR can also be used to criticize the large-scale pro-European campaigns that preceded the accession referendum in 2003, which was perceived as an operation of propaganda, producing a ‘déjà vu’ effect:

Sometimes I think this is all a bit too much, because back when I had just started working, everything revolved around the Soviet Union, and now it’s the European Union, so, going from one to another is a bit too much.

(Poland, F, 58, retired schoolteacher from a village in Lower Silesia)

This short cut is necessary for understanding recurrent eschatological declarations made by some Polish and Czech interviewees, according to whom the EU ‘is going to break up’ and cease to exist in

the medium term, just as other empires have fallen.

This parallel drawn between the EU and an Empire – Soviet or any other – is completely absent in the East German corpus. Rather than the Soviet rule, the economical and symbolical domination of the FRG during and after the fall of the Wall is taken into account to explain the political form of the EU and its articulation with national sovereignty. In order to assess the importance of the experience of the German unification in structuring attitudes, we need to study how the change of regime and its consequences are put into words and related to European integration in interviews.

### **Socialisation to Europe: understanding the effects of ‘European seniority’**

The difficulty in establishing convincing causal relationships through statistical correlations is particularly evident in the study of post-communist countries. While some authors consider trust in government at national level an important factor of support to European integration (Anderson 1998), other studies on new Member states develop the opposite argument (Tansoiu, Colonescu, 2008). A similar correlation of survey results suggests a somewhat paradoxical argument, according to which the worse the economic situation of a candidate or recent member is, the more support to European integration there is (Christin 2005, Sánchez-Cuenca 2000). This argument contradicts the interpretations usually made about the indicators of support observed in older member states.

Beyond these results, which show the reversibility of statistical correlations with general interpretative pretensions, we would like to analyze the effects of the number of years of Community membership, focusing on two main questions. First of all, we will study the uses of the recent collective experience of systemic transformations in the early 1990s in Poland and in the new Länder in the formulation of opinions on Europe. In a general manner, the word ‘Europe’ refers to heterogeneous spatial, geographical or political representations. Do national context and the length of socialisation to Europe have effects? These questions must be answered in an indirect manner, through the spontaneous associations provoked by the wording of the questions.

*To what extent are systemic transitions structuring experiences?*

Among the distinctive collective experiences, we would like to find out whether – and in what way – systemic transformations structure individual discourses. Because of specificities in the way past regimes ended and in the terms of accession to the EU, the visibility of European matters in public discourses was very unequal.

Several studies posit a strong connection between the individual or collective experience of systemic transformations and the perception of changes induced by the accession to the EU (Bielasiak 2002; Jasiocki 2005; Mach and Niedzwiedzki 2002; Turker, Pacek, Berinsky, 2002). However, in our empirical material, the frequency of references to the period of transformations varies in intensity and importance according to the contexts and the social categories. A major difference between the West German and the East German corpus lies in the mobilisation of the German unification process as cognitive prism to understand the EU enlargement to the East. This parallel tends to be drawn by the interviewees who are better informed and most interested in politics in West Germany. Although it is not systematically mentioned in East-German interviews, Unification is frequently mobilised by interviewees, even the least politicised, in order to give meaning to a number of questions discussed in the interview: the effects of the Euro (a parallel with the 1990 monetary unification), the Eastern enlargement, the differences in living standards and the presumed effects of European funding policies.

- Yes, the money flew in, but where did it go? Straight to the pockets of some Wessis (West Germans), who were quick to bring it all back home. The companies that constructed here were all from the West. And where did all the money go? Back to the West. ...

- So, what do you think about, for instance, the accession of Poland, and now Romania, Bulgaria ... the Baltic States to the EU. Do you have an opinion on that?

- Yes, they have always been a part of Europe. ... Now they are in the EU. All that is wonderful. But they are going to do exactly what they did here in the East. They are going to pull the same stunt. Several thousand people from here are going to make millions on their backs.

(East Germany, M, 46, 8 years of education)

Many interviewees who have little information to build a coherent discourse on the EU mobilise a

discourse 'available' in the new Länder to save face during the interviews. In the extract above, the East-West problematique is revisited in terms of rich and poor, exploiters and exploited. Other interviewees, for whom it is difficult to mobilise the binary East-West opposition, only rely on the opposition between the relatively unspecified 'fat cats' and 'the small guy', identifying themselves with the latter.

For people who have spent part of their adult life in the GDR and are struggling to find points of entry to comment Europe issues, the interview is structured by their personal experiences. Judgments on the unification and economic transformations are then more or less directly projected onto European themes. If the cognitive assimilation between the unification and the EU is more often found amongst 'losers' of the transition, 'winners' can also refer to it as a cognitive framework of a more abstract discourse:

People had a whole lot of dreams, hopes and so on and so forth after the change of 1989, and they were greatly disappointed, because, because... I think it was also because the EU was probably counting too much on economic integration. Same thing as in the GDR, yes: 'Now everyone will have the Deutschmark, and everything will be alright for you', right? And now look at East Germany today, and we also know about Slovakia and the rest, on a greater scale... No, so what I'm saying is that the power relations between FRG and GDR, in fact it's Western Europe, Eastern Europe, it's the same thing. Of course, I find this totally problematic. [...]  
Actually, what I don't like at all about the EU is this, this well, this current neo-liberal evolution.

(East Germany, M, 29, engineer)

Whereas in Poland, the accession to the EU gives some interviewees hope for improvement in public intervention on poverty, in the new Länder, the consequences of the East German economic meltdown in the early 1990s were counterbalanced by the welfare State, which is itself today thought to be threatened by the pressure from the economic competition of Eastern countries. In Poland, the interviewees make direct or indirect references to the transition period, but not systematically and in different ways. The period of transformations is mentioned through fragments of life stories without necessarily being associated with an opinion constructed in relation to the EU. Thus, the experience of unemployment leaves a permanent mark on lives of people interviewed. A technician, laid-off from a

big public company just before her retirement appears to be very affected; however, she does not relate this to her perception of the EU. In her non-negative distanced evaluation, she claims to be favorable to the EU and confirms she doesn't 'see the reason why [she] should be against it'. Interviewees who are critical of their living conditions may occasionally follow such observations by a favorable appreciation of the EU, as is the case of this former management assistant of a major public company, holder of a Matura in Economics, and who has been unemployed since 1990 (Poland, F, 52, unemployed). She keeps her distance from politics, and develops a critique of social policies in Poland that is informed by her own experience. What she apparently expects from the EU is a positive evolution for people living in poverty.

- During communism, I was leading a better life. And today I can't even find a job; I have become a victim of unemployment. I am homeless [...]
- Has Poland's accession to the EU had an impact on your situation or on your general perceptions?
- You know, I'm no politician, I've never done politics, but in Poland, everyone can comment on this subject, and today, we can even say a lot of things. This accession, well yes, I think it has done a lot of good for our country; that is to say, various funds for development... of towns. For example, in my town there is a bridge now, there were no access roads and they constructed them; this is also thanks to European Union funds. And here for example, this shelter [for the homeless], we are given food [...]. And these goods come from the EU, it says so on the package. Pasta and buckwheat... So, our accession to Europe is a good thing [...] since there's been some progress on social issues, for the unemployed and the homeless. Everyone receives something.

Some interviewees justify their decision to emigrate by the fact that their difficult social situation has been worsened by the liberal reforms of the 1990s. This is the case for this daughter of a couple of farmers, who now lives in Brussels. She mentions economic difficulties in her region of origin to justify leaving ('Life is hard back home in Poland'), but she also refers to her image as a poor immigrant ('They treated us like Africans', 'they didn't know that we also had cars') (Poland, F, 36, cleaner). To this politically disinvested interviewee, the EU is where her employers work: buildings she has never been to even though she lives nearby. Thus, even when people lacking political competence can experience the EU on a day-to-day basis as expatriates, European institutions remain



invisible to them.

To the Polish interviewees who evoke a negative experience of the transformations or have felt a decline in their career perspectives, the 'transition' appears to be confused with the changes related to the accession to the EU. This is the case for several interviewees who are above 60. For this generation, it is thus the year 1989 and not 2004 that constitutes a biographical break point. This does not prevent these people from interpreting political, social and economic reforms as responses to the European Community's demands. The opposite is observed for people whose experience of the common market is based on commercial exchanges and on the regulations to which they are subjected, such as businessmen. They seldom mention the period of transformation except to say, 'Communism was overthrown'. They make references to concrete implications of the 'acquis communautaire', by insisting on the anticipation effect at the time of the accession.

We were no longer a communist country before our accession to the EU; there was a free exchange market and everything already worked like in the West. It is just that we had not yet officially signed up as members of the EU. But we had adapted all the principles and norms to the Union in such a way that even before accessing the Union, in principle, everything worked the same way as in the Union.

(Poland, M, 36, owner of a small delivery business)

The subjective temporalities of systemic transformations and of accession differ according to the individuals' social positions. The upper socio-professional categories, that is to say those who participate in economic exchanges within the single market or those who have a high level of education, perceive the EU as a tangible reality which had in fact penetrated Poland long before 2004. For lower categories or for people who have experienced a decline in social or professional status, the EU remains a distant and abstract horizon. It is sometimes perceived as a dangerous external force that penalises the losers or on the contrary, as a welcomed constraint to overcome the failings of the Polish state. In this case its effects only became visible after the accession through tangible achievements or the ability to find work in Western Europe.

Our study confirms the hypothesis that the de facto accession of the five new Länder to the EU has pushed aside specifically European issues. As the accession to the EU was a side effect of the

unification, without any public debate, it is especially the problematique of new/old Länder which is associated with the transition and its causal logics of imputation. In Poland, a closer link between systemic transformations and the accession to the EU can be observed, reflecting the importance of a series of different reforms without all the interviewees considering accession as fundamental. Interviewees belonging to lower socio-professional categories, who have a hard time expressing opinions about the EU, can without going very deep into the subject ('what I would say is that it is a good thing'), use the question of accession as a springboard to refer to the economic situation in the country, which they consider bad ('if only things could change a little in our country'). Generally speaking, the cognitive assimilation between transformations and accession to the EU does not hold the same meaning for those who suffer from these processes and for those who seize the opportunities they offer.

### *The effects of accession on representations of Europe*

Our results show that it is simplistic to reduce support to the EU to a conception of temporality limited to the number of years of Community membership. Beyond possible ambivalences, the word 'Europe' leads to interpretations that vary from one context to another. In France, political and scholarly discourses have imposed a synecdoche to consider a part (the EU) as the whole (Europe). In new member states, this superposition of Europe as a cultural or geographical space with the European Union is not self-evident. In political discourses, being a part of Europe in the broad sense of the term was a legitimising element to justify the accession to the EU. This is useful to explain why many German and Polish interviewees belonging to upper or intermediary social categories ask the question: 'Do you mean Europe or the European Union?'. When talking about the EU, Polish interviewees – including nurses, blue-collar workers or homeless people – generally use the term 'Union'. This consideration of the different meanings of 'Europe' informs the representations of Europe in the discourses. In Germany, most of the interviewees consider Europe above all as a positively connoted geographical, historical and cultural space ('cultural, historical roots', 'Mitteleuropa', 'art'). They differentiate it clearly from the European Union, a vague political object which often elicits spontaneously negative associations in all categories of the population, although it is described with variable registers and themes. In Poland, the term 'Europe' triggers geographical (continent) and historical associations, with frequent references to educational experiences ('cradle of

democracy', 'Greek goddess') or emotional experiences ('one big family').

Amongst the interviewees who have less cultural capital, it is more especially visits abroad, which have become easier thanks to freedom of movement and the Euro, that constitute a thread of a vision of Europe as a space of exchanges. They allow interviewees to associate Europe to the EU and point out its specificity.

What I find very positive is, hum, multiculturalism; we have many, many countries with many different cultures, hum, which is not the case in the United States or Australia, or in Asia. The history of Europe is more interesting, I think, than that of any other continent. And personally, I think the density of Europe is more interesting compared to other continents for example, the fact that from Germany it takes an hour to get to Denmark or two hours to get to Poland.

(East Germany, M, 28, cook, travels a lot in his free time)

Freedom of movement and discovering European nations and cultures are particularly present in discourses of interviewees socialised in the GDR, as well as in Poland, and often mentioned early in the interview. If these elements are not absent in West Germany interviews, for many East Germans this is a true divide in their biographical experiences.

In addition to these generally positive references to Europe by Polish interviewees, references to the division of the continent during the Cold War are occasionally made. They emphasise the geopolitical situation of their country in the Soviet sphere of influence. The western part of the continent, or even sometimes the European Community, is therefore associated with democracy and economic progress. The position of exteriority in relation to the EEC is interpreted negatively as a factor of marginality and backwardness.

- Europe is above all a land, that's what I think, a territory; positive or negative, I can't say. It can be both. Do I take Europe as a whole or do I divide it into Eastern, Central and Western Europe, that is to say, we can explain it like this: the East makes me think about rather negative things; the reasons are obvious; I'm a middle-aged person, so, I remember very well the way things were before in our country and this does not evoke positive associations to us. But if I take Central and Western Europe, of course the associations are positive...

- You mentioned memories, memories of the past in relation to Eastern Europe, what were you

referring to?

- I was thinking about the former system of this country, communism. It was based on tons of restrictions with total absence of democracy and always, always older people who were better informed about what was happening in the world at the time, huh, who were against this system and were always saying, we always heard them say that the system in Western Europe was far better and more democratic.

(Poland, M, 40, former PE teacher, now an entrepreneur)

Reference to the division of the continent is not limited to people who have a lot of cultural capital; it can be expressed with less self-confidence. ‘Geographically we are European, right? [...] But when it comes to commercial objectives, we didn’t belong to Europe, we belonged to the Eastern part, right?’ (Poland, M, 56, farmer)

The East-West distinction, which explains some of the positive connotations associated with the EU in Poland, is present in interviews conducted in both parts of Germany but takes on different meanings. For many West German interviewees, in all sectors of society, it is strictly economic. Whereas most interviewees consider the accession of new member states to be a good, or inevitable thing, the economic lag of the East is perceived as a threat. In this case the enlargement is associated with the relocation of German businesses looking for cheap labour and lower taxes (the case of Nokia, which relocated a factory after having benefited from German state grants was mentioned by several interviewees from all social categories but the most underprivileged) or with the cost it represents to the German taxpayer.

East Germans have a more ambivalent view than the Polish and the West German interviewees on the distinction between the East and the West. The more undetermined geopolitical ‘Other’ is expressed in two main ways. The first one emphasises the differences in living conditions and wages that are immediately visible when crossing the Germano-Polish border: themes developed by West German interviewees reappear, sustained by personal anecdotes and experiences. In the second case, the West German or the West German system is often considered as the ‘Other’, which reveals an interpretation that is more focused on a social divide between the powerful and the weak than on a geopolitical one. In Poland, many interviewees from different categories describe the ‘Union’ as a dominant Other who ‘commands’ and ‘imposes’ its preferences.

## Conclusion

The comparative analysis carried out in Poland and Germany shows that temporality and collective experiences are important differentiating factors. While historical references are not structured in the same way in each national situation, these mentions of the past are rather articulated in an allusive manner, *a contrario*, or by referring to personal experience. Hence, we cannot look back to the historical past and memory and find an overarching frame weighing equally on the citizens of each country. Rather, there is a repertoire of available references; these references can be used in different ways according to the degree of politicisation, the level of education, family context or individual experience.

The comparison allows us to point out similarities between the two cases studied, although they are very different: general references of Europe through categories reflecting what was learned in school, the appreciation of freedom of movement by those who were once deprived of it, the feeling that the EU reestablishes preexisting power relations expressed by those who are 'dominated'. However, these power relations are perceived and expressed differently: for example, the relationship between the East and the West specific to unified Germany on the one hand; the political and economic domination of larger 'old Europe' countries, feared by Polish interviewees, on the other. Differences are also observed in historical accounts: in the two countries, Europe can be associated – although not by the same categories -with the pacification of the European continent, or on the contrary, to past conflicts and the division of the Cold War. The study allows us to question certain preconceived ideas. In Germany, the consensual character of political discourses on Europe does not prevent people from holding critical opinions and the intellectualist discourse on the national past and identity dominant in the political and media spheres finds little echo in the middle and lower regions of the social space. In Poland, commenting on 'Europe' temporarily allows certain categories of the population to break their usual silence and give limited but clear opinions on the perceived effects of accession. The subjective construction of temporalities reveals assimilations (transition/accession, enlargement/German unification) and connections (Second World War/Iraq war, EU/empire), in which the reference that is the most heavily invested by the interviewee eventually prevails. These

asynchronous figures, related to diverging discourses on the nation and/or Europe (is European construction a pacifying or divisive element?), confirm the value of a comparison focused on the notion of temporality.

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