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Strength of children's European identity: findings from majority and minority groups in four conflict-affected sites

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ABSTRACT

The European Union (EU) aims to promote peace. This research investigates the saliency of a European identity for children from majority and minority groups in four conflict-affected societies in Europe (Croatia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland (NI), and Republic of North Macedonia (RNM)). These sites represent a range of relations with the EU (e.g., leaving the EU, an EU member, wanting to join the EU). Participants included 442 children aged 7 to 11 years, evenly split by gender and group status (Croatia $n = 90$; Kosovo $n = 107$; NI $n = 60$; RNM $n = 185$). After a draw-and-tell task to prime European identity (vs. ingroup or control condition), we measured children's identification with Europe, outgroup attitudes and prosociality. Although the European identity prime was not effective, children's strength of European identity varied by site and group status and related to more positive attitudes and prosociality towards the conflict-rival outgroup. Implications for the future of the European project are discussed.

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KEYWORDS Ethnicity; intergroup relations; European identity; conflict; peace

The European Union (EU) was created after World War II with the aim of establishing peace; towards this end, the EU received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. Understanding the development of a European identity is not only relevant for the future of peace on the continent but also may

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relate to positive developmental outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, Agirdag et al., 2016 inclusion, Fleischmann & Phalet, 2018). To complement previous research that has explored the roles of schools, for example, in shaping children's European identities (e.g., Lennon Malbasha et al., 2022; Rohde-Liebenau, 2020), this study tests the potential of priming European identity using a child-friendly draw-and-tell task. To better understand the role of socio-political factors and extend important work on children's national identities (e.g., Oppenheimer & Barrett, 2011; Reizabal & Ortiz, 2011), we compared the strength of European identity among children from majority and minority groups in four conflict-affected societies. We further examined the association between children's European identity and constructive intergroup relations (i.e., outgroup attitudes and prosociality) towards conflict rival groups, with implications for future peacebuilding (Taylor, 2020), at the heart of the European project.

European as a common ingroup identity

The EU aims to promote peace among member countries in at least two ways. First, to be eligible for membership (and therefore, economic and social welfare benefits), countries must meet a number of prerequisites, most notably, a stable democracy that guarantees rights and protections for minorities (European Commission, 2021). Second, pioneers of the EU sought to establish peace and reduce group division by creating a superordinate, 'common' identity, made salient by shared symbols (e.g., the EU flag, the euro; 2021a, 2021b). This approach to peacebuilding is plausible through the lens of social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1978). SIT outlines how individuals readily define the identity of themselves and others in relation to their group membership, which has cognitive, affective, and behavioural consequences (e.g., Brown, 2000; McKeown et al., 2016). One such consequence is the relative preference for ingroup compared to outgroup members.

Since its creation in the 1950s, empirical support has emerged for the ideas of the EU, and a 'common ingroup identity model' more generally, as a means of reducing intergroup bias (Gaertner et al., 1993). A common ingroup identity involves recategorization of groups from 'us and them' into 'we', through identification with a superordinate category. Therefore, individuals who were formerly outgroup members can now enjoy the privileges afforded to ingroup members (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000).

Recategorization may improve intergroup attitudes (e.g., Gaertner et al., 1993) and promote outgroup prosocial behaviour among adults (Nier et al., 2010). For example, stronger European identity was linked with prosocial behaviour towards immigrants in Portugal (Pinto et al., 2020) and more positive attitudes towards immigrants and religious minorities in Hungary (Kende et al., 2019). Further, across 22 countries, stronger identification with Europe among adults is related to more support for inclusion of immigrants (Visitin et al., 2018).

A superordinate national identity, without the emphasis on the shared or common aspects, has mixed effects for children's intergroup attitudes. For example, there were no correlations among different dimensions of national identification and ingroup preference among children (age 7–11 years) in Bosnia (Oppenheimer & Midzic, 2011), whereas, in Northern Ireland, for children (age 7–11 years) from the majority status group (i.e., Protestant community), there was a negative association between national identity and outgroup attitudes. However, emphasizing the *common* aspects of national identity may reduce intergroup bias and discrimination in children. For example, both European and African origin Portuguese children (age 9–11 years) evaluated outgroup members more positively after they had completed a common ingroup intervention, compared to a control. The intervention emphasized their superordinate ethnic category (Portuguese) along with shared symbols (e.g., same coloured ID badges) and goals (Guerra et al., 2013). In addition, following a natural disaster (i.e., a shared threat), 'one-group' representations among majority Italian and minority immigrant children were also related to positive outgroup attitudes and helping intentions (Vezzali et al., 2015). These studies emphasize a shared or common national identification.

Thus, a common ingroup identity, at the *national* level, may be effective in reducing intergroup bias and promoting outgroup prosociality among children in both majority and minority groups in some, but not all contexts (Barrett & Oppenheimer, 2011). Compared to a shared national identity, which may align with the majority group's ethnicity (i.e., ingroup projection, Wenzel et al., 2007), an overarching identity may be particularly important to reduce conflict. This points to the need to consider superordinate identities, which maybe more inclusive for both majority and minority group members. More specifically, how a superordinate *European* identity may promote positive intergroup relations among conflict rivals remains unexplored in children.

European identity in middle childhood

European identity emerges across early to middle childhood, although the strength or rate of development may be influenced by socio-historical factors, as is seen in the development of national identity (Oppenheimer, 2011). Across a range of contexts, by age 6–7 years, the majority of children can identify their nationality; between ages 7 and 11 years, children also become increasingly able to entertain multiple group categories related to nationality. For example, only 3% of English children age 6 years compared to 70% age 10 years said ‘yes’ when asked if they were a European person (Barrett, 1996). Similarly, only 30% of children age 6 years said that they were glad to be European, compared to 80% of those age 10 years. In a separate study conducted almost two decades later, only 52% of English children aged 9–10 years identified as European, although they did so significantly more often than Bulgarian at the same age (37%) (Slavtcheva-Petkova & Mihelj, 2013). Overall, data from over 4,000 suggest that children may identify as European by age 6 years, and this identification increases through age 11 (Barrett, 2007). Comparisons across these studies indicate that there may be individual differences as well as cross-national differences in the strength of children’s European identities, which may additionally vary over time.

Children’s strength of European identity also appears to vary by group status, potentially with different implications for children’s intergroup relations. The focus, to date, primarily has been on comparing native and immigrant children. For example, Turkish ethnic minorities in Belgium reported stronger identification with Europe than the national identity (Agirdag et al., 2016). However, for both Turkish and native Belgian peers, strength of European identity was moderately related to individual-level outcomes (e.g., academic achievement). Complementing the focus on how children’s identities relate to other outcomes, comparisons across five European countries found that more inclusive identities were linked with less discrimination towards ethno-religious minorities in school (Fleischmann & Phalet, 2018). These findings suggest a need to directly assess the strength of children’s European identity, across contexts, as well as how that identity influences children’s intergroup relations.

Current study

The current study examined the strength of European identity in children age 7–11 years, and how this superordinate identity related to their

outgroup attitudes and prosociality. In addition to increasing awareness of superordinate categories, such as being European (Barrett, 2007), in middle childhood, children are also acutely aware of group dynamics (e.g., power, status; Abrams & Rutland, 2008) and conflict-related ethno-religious categories and symbols (e.g., Taylor et al., 2020). Such ethno-religious symbols (e.g., flags) can prime ingroup favouritism; indeed, children's ingroup symbol preference, among both majority and minority groups, was negatively related to their outgroup prosociality in four conflict settings (Shamoa-Nir et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021). Here, we explore whether priming children with a more inclusive European identity, would instead, promote outgroup prosociality, relative to ingroup and control conditions.

Four sites were selected for the current study because they vary in their current EU status, which may be a proxy for public sentiment/dominant narratives towards European identity, and have experienced recent periods of intergroup conflict. Northern Ireland (NI) is now the most distant in status from the EU, having withdrawn its membership alongside the United Kingdom in 2020; Croatia, however, has had full membership since 2013. The Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) has been recognized as an EU 'candidate' since 2005 and is currently negotiating accession terms, while Kosovo currently has 'potential candidate' status with no indication of change.

Each site has also experienced recent conflict between minority and majority ethno-religious groups; the official end of conflict was marked by the signing of peace agreements in 1995 (Croatia), 1998 (NI), 1999 (Kosovo), and 2001 (RNM). Despite these agreements, tensions remain with sporadic renewals of conflict. Complementing previous studies that focused on immigrant and native peers (e.g., Agirdag et al., 2016; Fleischmann & Phalet, 2018), this study focuses on conflict-related rival groups. That is, majority/minority group labels refer to the relevant conflict-related ethno-religious groups (Croatia: Croatian/Serbian; Kosovo: Albanian/Serbian; NI: Protestant/Catholic; RNM: Macedonian/Albanian).

In each site, segregation between groups is also prevalent; majority and minority children are separated within the education systems. This is notable as previous research has examined the role of schools in promoting national and European identities (e.g., Lennon Malbasha et al., 2022; Rohde-Liebenau, 2020). By focusing on these groups, the peacebuilding implications of a European identity can be examined (Taylor, 2020).

The first research question examined if a simple draw-and-tell technique could prime children's strength of European identity, compared to an ingroup (ethnic) identity and a control condition. Examining this possibility was important because, if greater identification with a European identity was associated with more positive outgroup outcomes, then understanding how to promote such identification would be beneficial for peacebuilding. Elements of this simplified procedure (e.g., drawing in response to prompts such as 'what is Europe'—see Methods) have successfully primed group identity in adults (Wang & Dovidio, 2011) and children as young as age 3 years (Gaither et al., 2014). Demographic variables, such as child age and gender, were considered in relation to the first research question.

The second research question examined the relative strength of children's European identities overall, and then by majority/minority status and across the four sites. Previous research has demonstrated differences between minority and majority children in their strength and attachment to national identity. On the one hand, minority children reported stronger national identification than majority children (Gallagher & Cairns, 2011; Oppenheimer & Midzic, 2011). On the other hand, minority children exhibited lower preference for national symbols and emblems than majority children (Dautel, Maloku, Misoska, & Taylor, 2020). In the light of these prior findings, it is important to explore group differences in European identity. One possibility is that minorities would identify more strongly as European, given that EU membership is intended to provide protections for minorities (e.g., the right to education in their own language).

Finally, the third research question explored the potential links between children's strength of European identity and outgroup attitudes and pro-sociality, with consideration of group status and site. Our overall analytical approach aimed to understand the shared and site-specific nature of the research questions. As such, we begin by analysing the whole sample and to provide further nuance we report on those analyses for each site. This approach is consistent with the comparative approaches used in related studies (e.g., Bennett et al., 2004; Oppenheimer, 2011).

Methods

Participants

Participants included 442 children aged 7–11 years; 90 from Croatia ($M_{\text{age}} = 9.00$, $SD = 1.26$, 53.3% female), 107 from Kosovo ($M_{\text{age}} = 8.70$,

$SD=1.24$, 48.6% female), 60 from NI ($M_{age} = 9.13$, $SD=1.30$, 48.3% female), and 185 from RNM ($M_{age} = 9.07$, $SD=1.33$, 51.9% female). The sample was balanced by majority/minority status: Croatia (Croatian = 47.8%, Serbian = 52.2%), Kosovo (Albanian = 53.5%, Serbian = 46.5%), NI (Protestant = 50%, Catholic = 50%), and RNM (Macedonian = 53.5%, Albanian = 46.5%). The minority groups selected represent the conflict rival related to the most recent period of violence in each site (Taylor et al., 2021). The sample size within each site aimed to detect a significant mean difference between majority/minority group members at power = .80 (Cohen, 1992); see pre-registration at <https://osf.io/cnk37> (see Appendix A for information regarding socioeconomic status).

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by Queen's University Belfast, and all participants had parental consent and provided assent prior to the study. Trained, local research assistants from each site conducted sessions virtually due to COVID-19 public health guidelines from January to June 2021. All participants were recruited via social media or schools and received a small compensation and a certificate to thank them for their participation (see Appendix B for additional data collection details).

Identity prime

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three prime conditions: European, ingroup and control (see Appendix C). Children were primed by a short interview, in which they were asked about the category of interest (adapted from Wang & Dovidio, 2011). For example, in the European condition, children were asked, 'What is Europe? What is the European Union? What reminds you about being European? What things are shared (or the same) across Europe?' Children then spent a few minutes drawing a picture about their primed category (the draw-and-tell technique; Driessnack, 2006; see Appendix D), which could relate to the previous discussion or a number of symbolic prompts: 'flags, money, sports, music, food'. In the ethno-religious ingroup condition, children were prompted with the same questions with respect to their ingroup, while the control condition prompted participants to think about being a child. Following the prime, children completed the strength of European identity; outgroup attitudes and prosociality then followed in a random order.

Measures

Strength of European identity

Participant's strength of European identity was assessed by asking how much they liked being European (adapted from Cameron et al., 2006). Responses were scored from 0 (I do not like being European at all) to 3 (I like being European a lot).

Outgroup attitudes

This construct was assessed with two items: 'how much do you like [outgroup] children?' and 'how much do you trust [outgroup] children?' (adapted from Nesdale et al., 2009). Both were scored from 0 (I do not like/trust them at all) to 3 (I like/trust them a lot). The two items were highly correlated, $r(427) = .69$, $p < .001$, and averaged for an outgroup attitudes score.

Outgroup prosociality

Children completed an adapted version of the 5-item prosocial subscale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997), which specified an outgroup target of prosociality for each item. For example, 'I try to be nice to people from the [outgroup] community. I care about their feelings'. Higher scores indicated greater outgroup prosocial behaviour with good internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$).

For both the outgroup attitudes and outgroup prosociality scales, the relevant conflict-related rival group within each site was used. Based on the parents' report of the child's background, the following group labels were used in each site: Croatia (Croatian/Serbian), Kosovo (Albanian/Serbian), NI (Protestant/Catholic), and RNM (Macedonian/Albanian).

Results

The means, standard deviations and ranges for all study variables are given in Table 1.

Efficacy of prime

Examining the first research question, a one-way between groups ANOVA was performed, determining differences in strength of European identity, as a function of prime (European/ingroup/control). Differences between the European ($M = 2.21$, $SD = .76$), ingroup ($M = 2.20$, $SD = .88$), and control

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation, and range of study variables ($N = 442$) by group status, collapsed across four sites: Croatia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland and Republic of North Macedonia.

	Mean		Std. Dev		Range
	Minority	Majority	Minority	Majority	
EU Identity	2.20	2.14	.75	.91	0–3
OG Attitudes	2.07	1.90	.77	.73	0–3
OG Prosociality	15.72	14.71	4.03	5.06	0–20
Age	8.93	9.11	1.32	1.29	7–11

($M = 2.10$, $SD = .86$) condition were not statistically significant, $F(2, 431) = .78$, $p = .46$ (Table 2).

We then examined whether age and gender were correlated with each of the study variables (Table 3). For both minority and majority children, age was not significantly related to strength of European identity, outgroup attitudes or outgroup prosociality. A technical fault resulted in missing age data ($n = 74$) from the Kosovo site. Because age was unrelated to the study variables, it was not controlled for in subsequent analyses. Gender was significantly related to prosociality for the minority alone; because the effect size was small and gender was not the focus of the current study, it was omitted from subsequent analyses.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation ($N = 442$) by condition, collapsed across four sites: Croatia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland and Republic of North Macedonia.

Prime Condition	Strength of European identity	
	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
European	2.21	0.75
Ingroup	2.2	0.88
Control	2.1	0.86

Table 3. Bivariate correlations for all study variables ($N = 442$) by majority and minority group status.

		Minority				
		EU Identity	Outgroup Prosociality	Outgroup Attitudes	Age	Male
Majority	EU Identity		.26***	.19**	.03	-.01
	Outgroup Prosociality	.21**	-	.65***	-.02	-.20**
	Outgroup Attitudes	.19**	.68***	-	-.01	-.07
	Age	.06	.05	.08	-	-.03
	Male	.13	-.09	-.05	.06	-

Correlation matrix for study variables by demographic characteristics ($N = 442$) across four sites: Croatia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland and Republic of North Macedonia. Correlations for the majority and minority groups are shown below and above the diagonal, respectively..

Strength of European identity

Examining the second research question, a series of one-sample t-tests, with Bonferroni correction, were performed to investigate whether children's responses were significantly different from the midpoint of the scale, when judging how much they like being European (Figure 1). Across all sites, and across both majority and minority groups (with one exception), participant responses were significantly above the midpoint, indicating a stronger attachment to being European, all p values $< .001$, d values $> .60$, than chance alone. The only exception was the majority (i.e., Protestants) group in NI, $t(26)=.76$, $p = .09$, $d = .33$, which was not different from chance.

To examine the effects of majority/minority status and site on strength of European identity, a two-way between subjects ANOVA was performed. The main effects of status, $F(1, 431)=.05$, $p = .82$, and site were not statistically significant $F(3, 431) = 1.94$, $p = .12$. However, the status \times site interaction was statistically significant, $F(3, 431) = 10.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$.

Pairwise comparisons found that there was a significant difference in strength of European identity between minority and majority participants in NI, RNM and Croatia (Figure 1). In NI, minority participants had a stronger European identity ($M=2.20$, $SD=.65$) than majority participants ($M=1.74$, $SD=.71$), $F(1, 424) = 4.21$, $p = .041$, $\eta^2 = .01$. In RNM, minority participants also had a significantly stronger European identity ($M=2.40$,

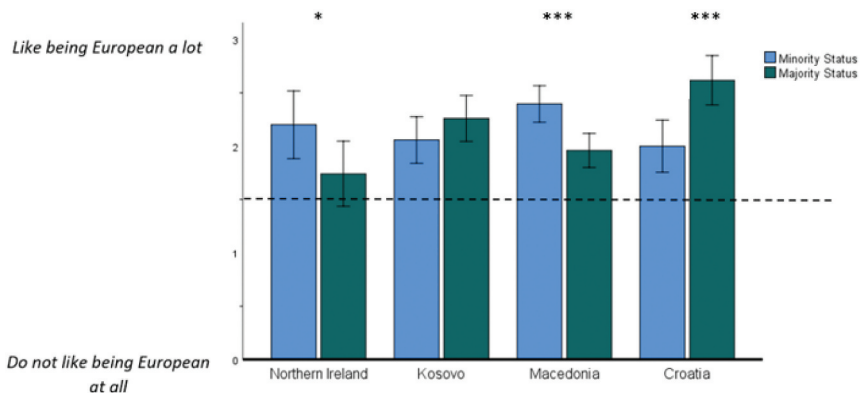


Figure 1. Strength of European identity as a function of site and majority/minority status. The dashed line indicates the midpoint of the scale (i.e., no preference). A significant difference between the minority and the majority groups is indicated by: * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

$SD=.71$) than majority participants ($M=1.96$, $SD=1.01$), $F(1, 330) = 13.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Yet, in Croatia, the opposite effect was observed, as majority participants ($M=2.62$, $SD=.64$) demonstrated a stronger attachment to European identity than the minority ($M = 2.00$, $SD=.86$), $F(1, 330) = 12.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. These findings are consistent with the socio-historical context of sites and will be elaborated on in the Discussion.

Children's European identity and outgroup attitudes

The following two sections respond to the third research question. All moderations were carried out in SPSS 27, using Model 1 in PROCESS (Hayes, 2017); the moderation was bootstrapped with 5000 replications, continuous variables were mean-centred and significance was assessed with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals.

Whole sample

Across the four sites (Figure 2), strength of European identity significantly predicted more positive outgroup attitudes ($b = .20$, $se=.07$, $p = .004$), and minority groups were more positive towards outgroups than majority groups ($b=-.17$, $se=.07$, $p = .017$), but the interaction was not statistically significant ($b=-.04$, $se=.09$, $p = .60$).

By site

In Croatia ($n = 89$), Kosovo ($n = 106$) and NI ($n = 46$), the moderation analysis was not significant; group status, strength of European identity, nor their interaction related to children's outgroup attitudes. However, in RNM ($n = 184$), strength of European identity positively predicted outgroup attitudes ($b = .32$, $se=.10$, $p = .001$), and minority children held more positive outgroup attitudes compared to majority children ($b=-.22$, $se=.10$, $p = .036$). There was also a marginally significant interaction between European identity and status ($b=-.23$, $se=.12$, $p = .068$; Figure 3). For the minority group, European identity significantly predicted outgroup attitudes (effect=.32, $se=.10$, $p = .001$), but this effect was not statistically significant for the majority (effect=.10, $se=.07$, $p = .11$).

Children's European identity and outgroup prosociality

We then examined if majority/minority group status moderated the link from strength of European identity to outgroup prosociality.

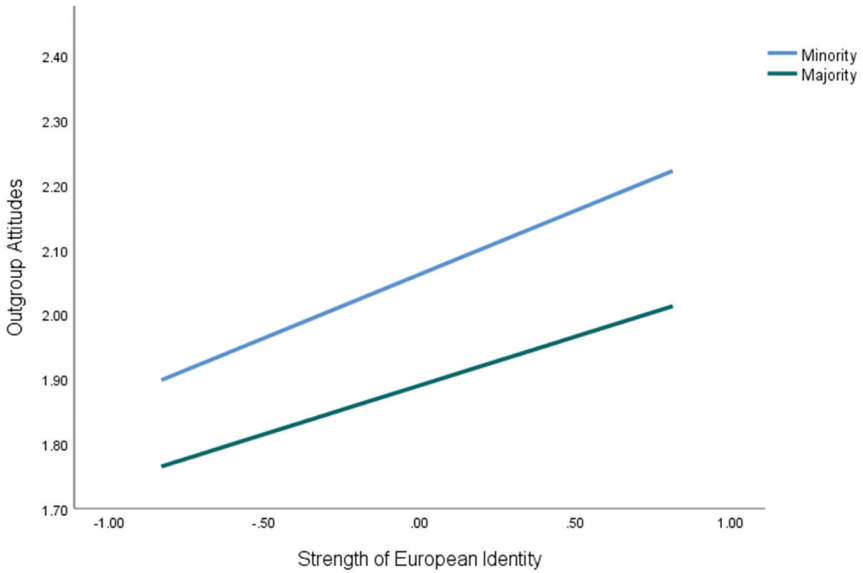


Figure 2. The main effects of both majority/minority status and strength of European identity (mean centred) on outgroup attitudes across the whole sample ($N = 424$).

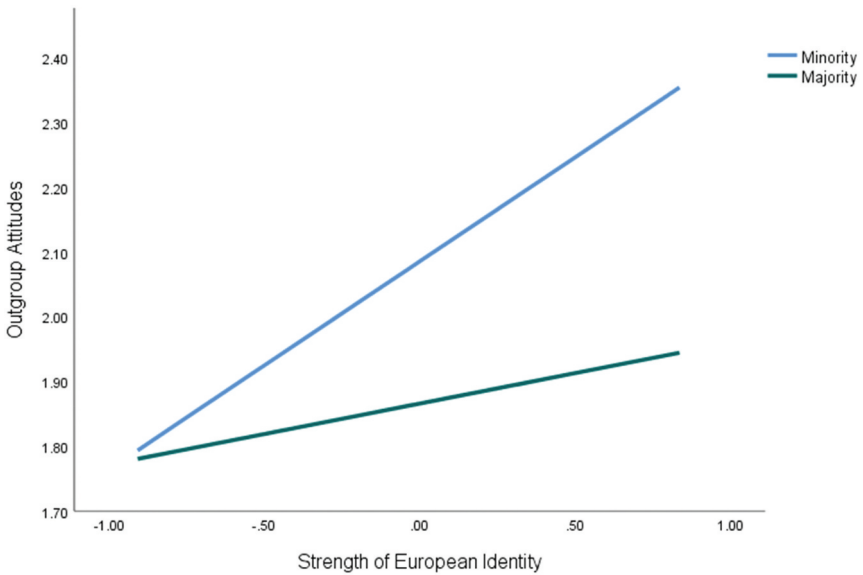


Figure 3. The interaction between majority/minority status and strength of European identity (mean centred) on outgroup attitudes in the RNM ($n = 184$).

Whole sample

Across the four sites (Figure 4), strength of European identity positively predicted outgroup prosociality ($b = 1.37$, $se = .42$, $p = .001$), and minority children reported more outgroup prosocial behaviours compared to majority children ($b = -.93$, $se = .44$, $p = .033$). The interaction was not statistically significant ($b = -.20$, $se = .54$, $p = .70$).

By site

In both Kosovo and NI, there were no significant effects. In RNM, strength of European identity positively predicted outgroup prosociality ($b = 1.57$, $se = .63$, $p = .014$); on average, the minority group was higher in outgroup prosociality ($b = -1.81$, $se = .63$, $p = .005$), but the interaction ($b = -.39$, $se = .76$, $p = .60$) was not statistically significant. The same pattern was found in Croatia, that is, strength of European identity positively predicted outgroup prosociality ($b = 1.13$, $se = .54$, $p = .040$), minority children reported more outgroup prosociality compared to the majority group at the statistical trend level ($b = -1.17$, $se = .69$, $p = .091$), but interaction was not statistically significant ($b = .31$, $se = .87$, $p = .72$).

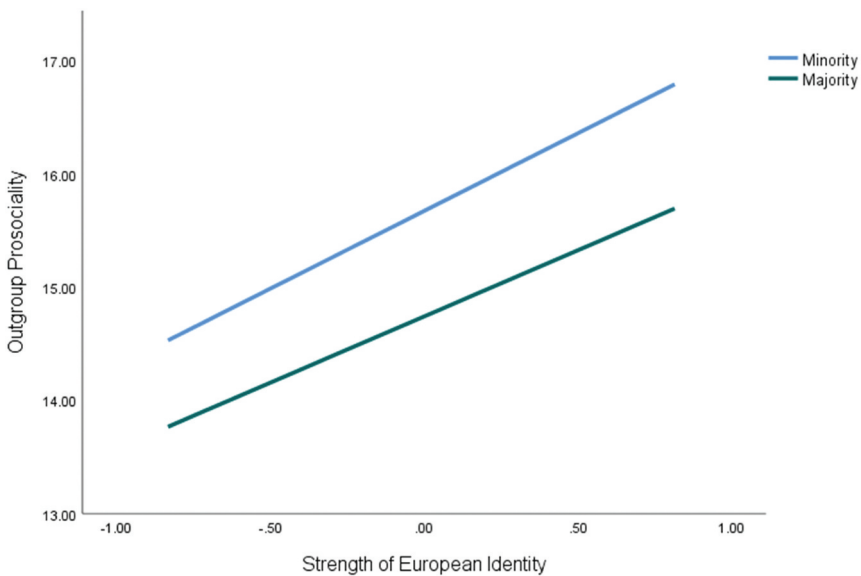


Figure 4. The main effects of both majority/minority status and strength of European identity (mean centred) on outgroup prosociality across the whole sample ($N = 425$).

Discussion

The current study examined variation in children's strength of European identity across four settings and comparing majority and minority group status related to historical conflict rivalries, extending previous work on national identities (Oppenheimer & Barrett, 2011). We further explored if European identity could be primed in middle childhood, and the implications of a child's European identity for their outgroup attitudes and prosociality, with implications for peacebuilding in Europe.

In response to the first research question, the draw-and-tell prime was not effective at increasing children's strength of European identity, compared to ethnic ingroup or control conditions. Alternative priming procedures were piloted, including exposure to images of flags: of national ingroup, EU, or a blank control (from Taylor et al., 2021) and a word search including the names of national ingroup regions, European countries, or nature words as a control (adapted from Harris et al., 2013). Future research will need to explore effective primes specifically for European identity (e.g., Lennon Malbasha et al., 2022), particularly for this age group. Given the superordinate nature of a European identity, there may be a need to adapt state-of-the-art research on children's national identities (e.g., Barrett, 2007).

In response to the second research question, all children reported stronger attachment to the European identity than chance alone, except for Protestants (NI majority group). Yet, there was also variation by site and status. In Kosovo, there were no majority/minority group differences in children's strength of European identity. In Croatia, the majority group children had stronger European identity, while in NI and RNM, minority children reported greater attachment to the European identity. These patterns could be related to how group status interacts with the socio-historical context, more specifically, each site's relation to the EU.

We further explore these patterns across the four sites. One possibility for the lack of majority/minority group differences in strength of European identity in Kosovo is the saliency of a relatively new national identity since 2008 (see Maloku et al., 2016). Moreover, the relatively positive association children in Kosovo have with being European may reflect two decades of investment and support from the EU and European Commission (European Union and Kosovo, 2022). Similarly, positive associations with being European were found for majority group children in Croatia, a member of the EU since 2013. It is possible that majority group

(Croatian) children may project their own ingroup characteristics onto the superordinate category of being European, whereas minority (Serbian) children do not (e.g., Wenzel et al., 2007). Moreover, this pattern among children is consistent with higher pro-European orientation among adults in Croatia compared to Serbia (Mihic et al., 2021). Thus, for both majority and minority group children in Kosovo and Croatia, two countries with close relations to the EU, children reported stronger European identities.

Yet, in NI and the RNM, a slightly different pattern emerged: in these sites, children from the minority group reported a more positive orientation towards being European compared to majority group children. In NI, children from the majority group (Protestants) were the only group to not report stronger European identity above change. Given the saliency of Brexit, it is possible that children were aware of their group's positionality towards the EU: in NI, 60% of the majority group (Protestants) voted to leave the EU compared to only 15% of the minority group (Catholics) (Garry et al., 2017). Relatedly, in RNM, majority group (Macedonian) children reported significantly lower European identity compared to minority group (Albanian) children. Given recent disputes with EU neighbours, such as Greece (leading to changing the country's name in 2018) and Bulgaria (over Macedonian language, history and identity), a fifth of the population did not want to join the EU and reported that joining EU will lead to loss of national identity (Damjanoski, 2021). In addition, although both ethnicities see the EU as an ally, support is stronger among Albanians (60%) than Macedonians (40%) (Damjanoski & Kirchner, 2020). In sum, NI and RNM, adults in the majority group may feel ambivalent or even hostile towards the EU; the children in our sample seem to reflect this pattern. Across all sites, these findings demonstrate the importance of investigating socio-historical context in relation to developing a European identity in middle childhood (see also Oppenheimer & Barrett, 2011).

In response to the third research question, despite mean level differences noted here, across the sample as whole, children's strength of European identity was positively related to higher outgroup attitudes and more outgroup prosocial behaviour; this link did not vary based on majority/minority group status. Although particular samples were limited in size (e.g., NI), the overall pattern within a site remained the same. In other words, across four post-accord societies, for children from both sides of the conflict rivalry, a stronger attachment to a European identity was related to more positive intergroup relations. Given that in each site,

children were born after the height of intergroup violence, there are clear practical implications of this overall finding. Across four sites, children's identification with being European was linked with more constructive attitudes and behaviours towards conflict rivals, lending support to the EU's mission to support peace in the region.

Limitations and future directions

The current study has a number of limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, a greater sample size within each site would provide more statistical power to detect smaller effects. Second, our measure of identity strength was a single item, and outgroup attitudes were measured by two items. Although these measures have been established for use with children, use of broader scales may reveal more variability. Third, future research might also focus on the predictors of children's European identities, such as school curricula (e.g., Rohde-Liebenau, 2020) or parental influences (e.g., Štambuk et al., 2020). This may include cross-cultural research, as in the current study, as well as exploring links to parental attitudes. Finally, given that national and European identities are not mutually exclusive (Duchesne & Frogner, 2008), the suggestions offered here as to possible group differences may be explored through additional measures on common ingroup identities and/or ingroup projection among children in conflict settings.

Conclusion and implications

These findings build on previous research investigating European identities, particularly among adults (e.g., Gobel et al., 2018; Visitin et al., 2018), and more limited recent research with children and youth particularly focused on immigrants (e.g., Agirdag et al., 2016; Fleischmann & Phalet, 2018). The site selection includes relatively under-studied regions in Europe, such as recent and pending EU members in South Eastern Europe and subnational regions such as Northern Ireland (Gobel et al., 2018), and complementing earlier work on children's national identities (e.g., Barrett & Oppenheimer, 2011; Oppenheimer, 2011). The focus on the peacebuilding implications, such as children's outgroup attitudes and prosocial behaviours, among conflict rival groups contributes to new knowledge (Taylor et al., 2022). The current study suggests that across majority and

minority conflict rivals in the sample as a whole, there is a positive association between children's strength of European identity and out-group attitudes and prosocial behaviours. Thus, the superordinate or shared European identity may be a middle ground for groups to meet (Agirdag et al., 2016) lending support to examine the efficacy of school-based curricula related to European identities in primary schools (e.g., Blue Star Programme, 2022). Across four conflict-affected societies, there is support for the European project for peace.

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