

The Limits and Possibilities of a European Identity

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Abstract

European identity, as a common value, consists of diverse philosophical, historical and cultural elements, which are based on historical roots and are continually being supplemented with new elements. It is an identity, like any other collective identity, which is trying to produce unity in diversity. The values of identity are often expressed through a number of its objectives and principles such as: peace, democracy, freedom, equality, justice, prosperity, human rights, social cohesion and environmental protection. Collective identity enables any society to establish the necessary cohesion for living together in solidarity and mutual assistance, without erasing the differences among its members. The European Union aims, through its accession to the Union, to meet these ambitious values in the lives of their peoples. It is a challenge and there will be a need to engage all forces and resources in order to build a strong European identity.

The concept of European identity has been introduced into political discourse and the European agenda during the last three decades. It has also been the subject of a number of treaties and official documents. The concept of European identity is problematic itself but it is still at the centre of the debate in Europe. While the European Union crashes interstate border and tries to establish the European Society, European citizens and European identity; at the same time, it tries to reconcile the diversity of national identity under the common name - European identity.

The history of the European continent had been full of bad memories. After the Second World War, the process of European unification was initiated by common economic communities and political elites of the six founding member states – France, Germany, Italy and Benelux countries – through the European Coal and Steel Community. These founding states had the

intention of establishing a close union of peoples, which was stated later in the preamble of Treaty of Rome. The construction of a political community and European identity in the European Union has been a highly contested issue especially after the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. This Treaty introduced new forms of co-operation between the member state governments - for example, on defence and in the area of justice and home affairs. By adding this intergovernmental co-operation to the existing Community system, the Maastricht Treaty created the European Union. Since that time the EU has tried to initiate among the member states more and more different processes which focus on the realization of the project, called the "Union of European nations". This means union in defense, economics, politics and social matters. Finally, the Treaty of Lisbon has brought a new formation of the European Union which has raised new questions about European identity.

The enlargement and the construction of "the new Europe" require a debate on European identity in the face of the present challenges. What is meant by European identity and does it really exist? This is a highly debated topic regarding the ever-expanding European Union. As is common knowledge, the EU is a unique economic and political partnership between 27 democratic European countries which is continuously growing. The fundamental aims of the founders (primarily Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman in 1950) of this union were to maintain and promote peace, prosperity and freedom for its citizens in a fairer and safer world.

In the last decade or two, there have been many conferences organized and books published on the subject of European identity, and so it is safe to assume that there are some perceived problems in this area. In an attempt to illuminate such problems, and even to provide some answers, we shall deal here with definitions: What is collective identity? What might a European identity consist of? And how might it compete with national identity? In this way some of the confusion surrounding this issue can be cleared away.

The Question of Identity

As a result of globalization, multiculturalism, global civil society and cosmopolitan political and cultural currents, societies are becoming more and more pluralized and interpenetrating. The result of these major shifts in culture and politics is that national identities are changing.

A European identity, actually new European identities that are being shaped in the process of the EU enlargement and further development of the

European integration can be best presented in relation to specific types and categories of identities. The discussion on identity is very complicated because of the presence of many dimensions of different approaches and various definitions of the term of identity and its constituent elements. It is difficult to conceptualize European identity without identifying some components of the concept of identity in general and collective identities or political identities in particular. An identity consists of a set of ideas and values that enable an actor to determine “who I am -we are” (Wendt, 1994, p. 385). It provides symbolic meaning to people’s life, by enhancing their “self” definition and their feelings of belonging. There are two possible forms of identities: an individual identity and collective identity. That is to say, an identity could have an individual and/or collective feeling; one belongs to an entity or category which is determined by common characteristics. These two perspectives are defined as ‘personal’ and ‘social’ identities in the literature. A ‘personal’ identity refers to the single individual for whom identity means recognising oneself. On the other hand, the ‘social’ identity emerges from the consciousness of a pre-existing group with which a number of individuals will ‘identify’, and which they will together define.

Essentialist concepts of collective identities take cultural variables such as membership in ethnic groups as a given which then develop into national identities during the process of nation-building. National as well as a possible European identity are seen as collective identities. “Identity” in this sense can moreover be defined as a “feeling of belonging to a distinctive group or more abstract social unit” (Bucker, 2006, p. 265). Usually, these are nation-states, but this definition also includes lower regional units – or an entity such as the European Union.

The political aspect of identity is generally considered to be “the most important when thinking about the becoming of a European identity” (Schumacher, 2002, p. 8). “Political identity can be characterised as a precondition for the legitimacy of democracy. It thus necessarily has to be supported in order to shape a European identity” (Meyer, 2004, p. 21). Additionally, it is political rather than cultural identity that can be shaped in the constructivist sense. Political identity refers to the EU as a political union rather than to the cultural and historic Europe where borders cannot be defined clearly.

To summarize, feelings of European identity, and their consequences, do not need to compete directly with national identity. Collective identity is constructed, multi-level, and subject to change over time and place. European

identity, in the sense of feelings of Europeans, has existed widely for a very long time, certainly since the Renaissance, but such feelings are not the same as those which underpin national identity. In the sense of a collective identity at the European level which might justify the existence and operation of a modern state, or in this case a super-state, there has been a certain level of activity in the twentieth century, especially by the EU in its top-down activities. However, it would be hard to argue that a critical mass has been reached, and certainly the achievements are marginal or at best minor, compared to the activities of nation-state governments and populations.

A European Identity

The European space has grown to the extent that it is no longer possible to say what is national and what European. In Europe today, there is no national identity that exists on the level of a simple collective identity, i.e., an identity that is underpinned by a particular social group. All national identities are becoming more like societal identities, that is, broadly defined cultural categories.

People tend to get confused between the European Union as an institution and Europe as a continent. It is important to remember that not all European countries are part of the European Union and this brings up the other question of whether a single European identity has been or rather is being created excluding those non-member states. The questions on the subject of the European Union and European identity are never ending, but it is still too early a stage to come to any concrete and fully justifiable conclusions. This topic has come to light fairly recently, clearly researchers and theorists have been observing this phenomenon nearly for as long as the EU has existed; however, it is only in the last decade that more people have actually been taking notice. This is probably due to the fact that identity is far deeper a concept to analyze, people are usually born with an identity which has been given to them by their parents, but the case of a European identity is really quite unique.

A European identity is in fact in the process of being created. The current 27 member states constituting the EU have accepted the fact that one of the requirements has been the need to relinquish a degree of sovereignty to be a part of this single market. However according to surveys completed across the European Union in different nation states not all people have been as eager to abandon their cultural heritage and to be part of the new European

identity (Guibernau & Berdun, 2007). The European continent has always been diverse, in the sense that each country within has had its own language, religion and culture and many of these countries, especially the Mediterranean countries in the Southern part of Europe, have been and still are very patriotic and to a certain extent still quite conservative. Therefore to expect a strictly conservative society, such as in the case of Italy for example, to forget their heritage which they have been bound to for centuries is at this moment in time highly unlikely (Bennhold, 2005).

If we compare the European Union to the United States in some circumstances we can conclude that the two are very different entities. Setting aside the differences in political structure and organization, the United States has never had the rich and intricate history which the European countries have and it is for this reason that no matter what state people are from in America they still refer to themselves as Americans. A close sense of belonging and unity, which are really the main factors which constitute identity as such, have contributed to America acting as the world's superpower for the last 50 years. Regarding European identity it is also important to mention the question of generation which plays a vital role in the acceptance of change along with experience. Many of today's generation are well-travelled and are therefore more open to the option of seeing themselves as a part of a larger single European identity. These people fall under the category of the '*Erasmus Generation*' (Bennhold, 2005). The members of the EU have not only benefitted from a single market free of trade tariffs, democracy and national security, but the Union has also encouraged integration and communication among people from different countries, something that was far more difficult to do in the past. The European Union has in a way erased borders between countries making it easier for people to travel and move around. Students are now able to study in more than one country, therefore giving young people the opportunity to leave their home countries and live and work elsewhere (Bennhold, 2005). That is why some people believe that at this point it is a given to just call or refer to oneself as a European rather than Greek, Swedish or German seeing as one can technically live where they choose to and have to abide to a fixed set of rules and policies.

Limits of European Identity

Questions regarding the nature and content of European identity, but especially the search for a new European identity, its relations with other

identities and a possible loss of national identities are frequently asked in the context of the European Union (Western Balkans) enlargement. These questions are discussed and different views exist in all current EU member states. Initiated especially by opponents to the EU integration they are becoming burning issues also in the candidate countries. The public opinion in these countries fears that their national identities will be lost or, at least, substantially weakened with their full integration into the European Union. The enlargement of the Union has been criticized as distorting European cultural unity. Especially, the debates have been revolving around the question of Turkey's full membership. In this regard, it is claimed that Turkey which has a very different social structure in terms of religion and culture compared to the European one, cannot be a part of Europe. Some authors also argued that that is not possible because of the incompatibility of Islam with European secular values, while some others indicate that Turkish political culture and identity is far away from the European one (Hurd, 2006, p.32).

One major problem in the creation of a common plural European identity is the integration of traditional collective identities – such as ethnic, religious and national identities. These collective identities are usually closed, exclusive and based on belonging to and being closely integrated with specific communities. These collective identities based on belonging to a specific community are traditionally strong and very present in the life of an individual. Although this does not correspond to reality, these traditional communities with which we identify are perceived often as homogenous entities. Among the numerous problems that are undermining EU legislation, identity is assuming a big part of politicians' concerns. The concept of identity has deep implications for questions related to currencies, languages and democratic deficits. A key debate in Europe concerns the possibility of a European identity when language and currency are different among Europeans. Although one of these concerns, the currency problem, was partly solved in 2002 with the introduction of a single currency in Europe, linguistic identity, which was the core feature of past projects of territorial consolidation, poses a more intractable problem. It is not possible to consider the creation of a unique European language for obvious reasons, but it is legitimate to ask what language citizens will speak in a trans-territorial Europe, and the recognition, if not domination, of multiple languages.

Another practical problem constantly undermining the function of European legislation is the "democratic deficit". This kind of deficit refers to the citizens' lack of direct power in decision making. In fact many regulatory

decisions that affect the daily lives of citizens of individual nation-states are made in Brussels without their explicit consent. The general impression of people is that political decisions may be less transparent and more difficult to control in the EU than at the national level.

Possibilities of European Identity

Promoting “unity of diversity” and respecting the “mosaic of cultures” are the basics in the creation process of a European identity. It is certain that multiculturalism, as the right to be different and to foster one’s own culture, will be elementally asserted as the natural right of all individuals, which nobody can abnegate.

Building a new common European identity will require incorporation and certain transformations of existing European identities. Europe contributed greatly to social and cultural developments, made positive contributions to science, technology and culture, but also to cultural diversity and richness. However, its negative impacts were substantial as well. Europe produced aggressive and hegemonic nationalism, colonialism, fascism, Nazism, concentration camps etc. Such negative phenomena can be avoided in the future only if they are known well and if people are aware of their possible negative consequences.

This requires that we define positive contents of a new common, inclusive and pluralistic European identity and develop a comprehensive strategy for its development. This strategy shall include also a plan of concerted action for all relevant factors, including education, science, media and politics that with their activities can contribute to the goal. Although it is not very popular to speak about ideologies nowadays, the building of a new common, inclusive and pluralistic European identity does require a new “ideology of cooperation,” based on the inclusion, equality and recognition of diversity. This ideology shall show all advantages of equal cooperation and inclusion for the future development of Europe. Such a new ideology should complement the currently prevailing culture and ideology of competition and mobilize people to oppose and fight all exclusive political ideologies.

A new common, inclusive and pluralistic European identity has to recognize today’s reality. European integration will not do away with nation-states any time soon. It means that this new identity as a supranational identity has to complement the existing traditional national identities and patriotism. Additionally, as Europeans we will need to develop a democratic

supranational patriotism, which is only possible if the democratic legitimacy of the European integration and its possible transformation into a European federation are ensured. This is the reason why issues of legitimacy and democratic deficit need to be addressed seriously (Banchoff & Smith, 1999).

The Importance of European Identity

There are two reasons why European identity is of such importance for the future of integration. The first is expressed in the concept of “unity in diversity” and the second is in the idea of supranational democracy. Since the establishment of the European Union, the European Commission has worked hard to promote its identity and public awareness, mainly because Europe as a “cultural space lacks affectivity, that is, emotional attachment” (Weiler, 1999, p. 329). The European Commission acknowledges that the absence of a European people, and territory, is undermining the legitimacy of EU projects and this is the main reason why it has invested so much in its campaign for European identity (Shore, 2000).

Each year over 500 million euros are spent on cultural policy, which aims to promote the richness and diversity of Europe’s shared cultural heritage. “Unity in diversity” has become the official slogan for this policy. The idea of the unification or integration is necessary, for the EU commissioners, to provide equal and guaranteed benefits that are not available at the domestic level, to all the member states. These are peace, economic well-being, which is probably related to the creation of a larger and more competitive European market, greater international influence, political stability, broader citizenship, etc.

The second explanation of the promotion of European identity bases its validity on the idea that a true democracy can exist at the European level only if a European territory and consequently, identity exist. For democracy to work there must be people and territory, that is, a set of individuals who agree to make collectively binding decisions under some democratic rules. If the binding decisions are applied to individuals who do not recognize themselves as members of the society taking collective decisions, then democratic rule appears to become an imposition, a non-consented procedure (Sanches-Cuenca, 2000). In this way, the constitution of a territory is a precondition for the development of a supranational democracy and for the future of the European integration. The importance of territory is important in the context of Europeans’ opinions about their national-state and their identity. Europeans

still feel attached to their nation states and they are not prepared to accept decisions by majority rule at the supranational level in crucially important political areas.

Moreover, Europeans are not keen to observe the decisions taken at EU level simply because these decisions have been approved by a majority of citizens of the other member states. This negative feeling is held by the biggest proportion of citizens of the northern countries and to a lesser extent by the citizens in smaller central Europe. According to this argument, supranational democracy is possible only if Europeans from very different countries begin to feel that, in addition to their current territories, they belong to a wider, supranational territory; the European Union. The main problem so far is the dependence between the concept of territory and the feelings, shaped by history and culture, of each member state. Solving this problem is a big challenge for politicians supporting integration. Accordingly, the European Union is trying to build up and re-enforce positive affect towards the Union by specific actions to improve its visibility; those actions are mainly information disseminated by the mass media and targeted communication plans. In this line of argument, the fact that Europeans do not have any deep attachment to a supranational territory, and consequently do not have a stronger European identity, are the main factors which prevent the creation of a supranational democracy. As long as citizens do not think of themselves as Europeans, European democracy is doomed. Consequently, the creation of a supranational democracy is only possible when citizens from different member states share a sense of being involved in a common project and forming part of a single community.

In our belief, the development of the EU identity is a worthy and attainable goal because Europeans share not only common values, a common history, but also share a common future in the integration process. An identity is at the heart of the European integration project and the EU identity should be considered as "unity in diversity". The EU identity as unity in diversity is a belief in the common and a faith in the difference. Each country has its own national identity but added to that one can choose the EU identity and let the EU identity be a part of a member state's identity. Therefore, the objectives of the EU's cultural policy have to protect and promote cultural identity at regional, national and European levels and to realize an open and dynamic European cultural space which contributes to the EU identity. In the process of creating the common identity, there are certain things that need to be thought of and done locally, traditions for example; for the other matters it would be more appropriate

to think and act nationally like cultural policies; for economic, foreign and security policies, a European approach is much more suitable and a global approach is apropos for environmental and trade policies. In some fields such as human rights, social policy and financial policy, the EU has gone towards the notion of unity, union. However, if people want to feel European, they should move towards the greatest degree of integration. They should try to abolish any elements of nationalism that prevent Europe from achieving the so much wanted union and try to reach a common cultural policy as well. It is important to remind people that Europe is what its countries and people make. If people make their country and society prosper, it also benefits Europe and the EU. Hopefully, we should believe in the positive outcome of this magnificent task. If a common European home is to be realistic, we urgently need the creation of a new, inclusive and plural European identity, based on the principles of democracy, equality, recognition and respect of diversity and on the ideology of cooperation. If the European Union continues to support the principle of *unity in diversity* and the creation of common symbols like euro, European flag, European-wide cultural or sport organizations, it may overcome the identity question. For this end, we should undertake everything we can to start the awareness raising campaign and to contribute our share in the building of this identity.

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