

EU Identity – Identities In Formation And Change

Desislava Krалева

Keywords: Europe, identity, formation, change, theories

Abstract

The European identity has been the topic of a significant volume of research. Scientists focus on different identity aspects in an attempt to measure the establishment or viability of an EU identity. This paper, however, is going to take a different stance on the issue. It will take one of the basic theories on the components of national identities (ascribed vs. voluntarist components, Jones and Smith) and use it as a magnifying glass to examine those components. The theoretical framework will be enhanced by the findings on the role of symbols in generating national identities. The coupling of these two theoretical propositions would provide the apparatus needed for the examination of the degree to which the specific components are established and developed. The main thesis of the paper is that there is no single European identity to be studied. On the contrary – there are numerous variations. There are, however, two lines which signify that division. On the one hand, there is a clear-cut division line between old and new member states. Therefore, I claim that the European identities in old and new member states clearly vary. The validity of this statement will be studied through the examination of identity components in Belgium, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) and Bulgaria. On the other hand, there are significant variations among old member states themselves. The EU identity in Belgium is most probably different from the one in the UK. The comparison between data on the components of identities shall verify the truthfulness of the supposition. After ascertaining the variations between components in the three countries, the paper will briefly elaborate on possible causes for those variations. The conclusion will summarize the findings of the research and make proposals for possible further approaches to strengthen the EU identities.

Theoretical Approaches

The theoretical approaches in the study of national identities follow two main currents – those of historical sociology and empirical sociology. While historical sociology studies the construction of national identities as a historical process, empirical sociology tends to explain them with the attitudes, beliefs and opinions of citizens nowadays. The more commonly used approach is that of historical sociology, and for this field we need to mention the name of Anthony Smith as one of the most prominent researchers. He constructs a model of national identities which views them as a composition of civic and ethnic elements (Smith, 1991).

The framework which I will use in this paper mostly builds upon the model constructed by Smith. However, it has been adjusted by F.L. Jones and Philip Smith (2001) in order to capture variations from the theory which were observed among respondents in mass surveys. The framework which the authors offer differentiates between ascribed and voluntarist elements. The ascribed dimension resembles “the concept of ethnic identity described in the historical and theoretical literature” whereas the voluntarist is “closer to the notion of civic identity” (Jones & Smith, 2001, p. 103). As an example for ascribed components the authors give birth, citizenship, language, religion. Law and feelings of belonging pertain to the voluntarist components.

Building upon this framework and the fact that it was specifically designed to be implemented in mass surveys, I will examine both ascribed (currency and flag) and voluntarist (feeling of belonging) components. The consideration of both elements is done in order to give both elements equal weight and thus create a better picture of the formation of European identity.

In addition to these considerations, the meaning of symbols for the construction of social facts and the creation of national identities is of great importance for this analysis. Unlike objectively existing facts, social facts need to be situated in a certain context and supported by the common understanding of people who share them in order to exist. Dr. Kathleen R. McNamara argues in an article written in 2010 that “the EU is an institutional or social fact, invented through our intersubjective understandings and dynamic in its manifestation” (McNamara, 2010, p. 133). She continues to claim that “it has drawn upon its symbolic capital to construct itself and project meaning” (Ibid, p. 134). These observations, shared by a number of scientists and the importance of which is ultimately expressed in the idea that “Symbolic

representation constructs reality” (Ibid, p. 133) reveal the importance of symbols for the construction of national identities. Given the specific nature of the EU as a non-state and non-international organization actor, it is of even greater importance to consider such elements which allow it to establish itself as a social fact. Michael Billig (Billig, 2004) argues that “the concept of nationalism has been restricted to exotic and passionate exemplars...daily nationalism slips away from attention” (Billig, 2004, p. 8). What he claims is that the “metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being constantly waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building” (Ibid, p. 8). Thus, the underestimated importance of the symbols in daily life is crucial for the evaluation of the existence of an identity.

The paper will consider the illustrated importance of symbols and will examine the attitudes of citizens of different European states towards them. The aforementioned ascribed components (the common currency and the flag) can be viewed as symbols in themselves. To them I also add the views of EU citizens towards the draft EU constitution, which supplements a new symbolic element in the perception of EU identity. These considerations add a whole new layer of meaning to the analysis of the components of national identities.

This theoretical framework provides consideration for both identity components in accordance with a pattern, specifically designed to capture the characteristics of mass survey responses. The additional account of the importance of symbols provides an opportunity to fine-tune the findings and target them more precisely for the testing of the hypothesis of the paper.

Country Choices

The above mentioned components are examined in three separate countries, aiming to construct a comparative analysis between them. The idea behind the choices is the main hypothesis of the paper, namely that results will vary in different countries and so will the dimensions of European identity in them.

The specific country choices are Belgium, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) and Bulgaria. These countries are selected as they would allow for a comparison between old and new member states of the European Union (EU), which I consider an important reason for variations between the results. Belgium is among the founding states of the European Coal and Steel Community, established by the Treaty of Paris in 1951. The

UK, on its part, joined the European Economic Community in 1973. Thus, the citizens of these two countries have either got accustomed to the EU, or have been raised with the given fact of its existence. By contrast, Bulgaria joined the EU in the last enlargement of 2007 and people there are still in the process of accepting the mechanisms of the EU, its daily presence in their lives and ultimately of internalizing it.

However, there is a difference between these two old member states, which is of importance to the analysis. The difference regards the attitude towards the EU which prevails in the specific countries. Plentiful research has shown that Belgium is generally more optimistic towards the EU and has a more positive perception of it. At the same time, the UK is considerably more reserved in its attitudes and has opted out of a number of policies of the Union, including the common currency. This exemplifies another important point - that even among old member states, there might be significant degrees of divergence in attitudes which ultimately affect the identification of citizens with the EU and the EU identity in those countries.

Thus, we could view the analysis as a comparison between three distinct cases:

- An old member state with generally positive attitudes towards EU integration and the EU as a whole (Belgium);
- An old member state which is more reserved with respect to the integration process and has refrained from joining certain aspects of the European union (the UK), and
- A new member state which is still in the process of internalizing the structure it has joined and creating its attitude towards it (Bulgaria).

The results of the analysis of the empirical data should show whether the alleged difference between identities in countries is a fact, or it is a fallacy reinforced by the individual path of relations of states with the EU.

The Data

The paper uses information collected by the Eurobarometer survey, more specifically the Standard Eurobarometer issues 62 (published in 2005), 70 (published in June 2010), 71 (published in January 2010), the National reports for Belgium, the UK and Bulgaria (published in the autumn of 2004) and the Special Eurobarometer *Barometric questions*, published in February 2005. The issues in question are the most recent ones which deal with the attitudes of European citizens towards the euro, the flag and the feeling of

citizens as Europeans. A new comprehensive study on National and European identities is in the process of preparation and is due in 2013. Until it is published, however, this remains the most actual information.

I am going to analyze the data on the different aspects in a sequence (for the components under scrutiny) and I will examine the strength of those components in the countries in question.

Attitudes towards the Euro

In the Eurobarometer survey issue 70, published in 2010, the euro was the second most often mentioned item when Europeans were asked what the EU means to them (survey question QA14 “What does the European Union mean to you personally?” (Eurobarometer, 2010, p. 126). This is indicative of the importance European citizens attribute to the common currency and its close association with the EU. In light of viewing the euro as a symbol, this has even more powerful meaning as it indicates that the euro is perceived as a metonymical expression of the EU.

Thus, studying the attitudes towards the euro (refraining from talking about it in economic terms and analyzing it only from a symbolic point of view) could be a valid indicator of the degree towards which Europeans identify with the EU. The euro was the most frequently mentioned item by Belgian citizens, 57% of whom gave it as their closest association with the EU. This is the second highest result achieved by a country in the survey and is a clear indication of the overall positive attitude of Belgian citizens towards this important EU symbol.

By contrast, the UK (as well as Latvia) scored the lowest result in this category. Only 11% of UK citizens identify with the euro. A valid reason for this result is the fact that the country has opted out of the Eurozone, choosing not to adopt the common currency. However, as the euro is undoubtedly related to the EU, to a certain extent we can rely on this indicator as revealing the attitudes of UK citizens to the EU as a whole.

Bulgarians ranked the euro significantly lower (13%) than the EU average, which is 34%. This can be attributed to the fact that the country is not in the Eurozone yet. However, given the fact that there has been an ongoing discussion about the aspirations of the country to join the Eurozone and that the population is fairly informed of the functions of the Eurozone and the requirements and process of accessing it, we could assume that the

evaluations of the euro are still indicative of the overall apprehension toward the EU.

Thus we observe a very positive attitude towards the symbol of the currency in Belgium, contrasted by a fairly negative one in the UK. Bulgaria ranks in between these two countries as well as below the EU average on the item.

Attitudes towards the Flag

The public opinion towards the flag of the EU was particularly discussed during the debate about the Constitution of Europe. The draft Constitution envisaged the introduction of an official flag of the EU (12 golden stars on blue background) as well as an anthem. It was at this time that the issue about the attitude of EU citizens to the flag was given specific consideration.

The issue in which the results were published is "Eurobarometer 62 Public Opinion in the European Union". For the reasons mentioned above, the data available is from the year 2005. Unfortunately, no more recent data is present and I have to rely on these findings for my analysis. The data is taken specifically from the country reports, issued as a result of the research made.

The overwhelming majority of Belgian citizens consider the flag of the EU a good symbol – 91% of the interviewees expressed this opinion, as compared to an EU average of 82%. Moreover, the majority of Belgians identify themselves with the symbol – 54% compared with an EU average of 50% (Eurobarometre 62, 2004, p. 25). This speaks for a high level of approval of the flag as a symbol of the EU and, more importantly, for a high degree of identification with it.

Interestingly enough, the UK national report includes no data on the perceptions of British citizens of the EU flag and the degree to which they identify with it. The annexed questionnaire reveals that the question was included in the survey but findings have not been published. However, we could tentatively depict the image of the EU in general that British citizens have. The data on that question reveals that the opinions of the British are remarkably split between positive (32%), neutral (33%) and negative image (31%) of the EU (Eurobarometer, 2004, p. 28). Such distribution is untypical of the majority of EU countries where we usually observe a tendency for support of one of the views. Taking into consideration this result, we could predict that the attitudes towards the flag of the EU would be split as well.

This shows that the British are unwilling to identify with an EU-wide symbol and thus embrace such a sign of identity.

Bulgarian interviewees expressed an overall positive attitude towards the EU flag – 78% of them think it is a good symbol of Europe (Eurobarometer, 2004, p. 52). This result is remarkable, having in mind that at the time the survey was conducted, Bulgaria was not a member of the EU yet. This could be a reason why a significantly lower percentage of people identify themselves with it – 34% (Ibid., p. 52) in comparison with an EU average of 50% (Eurobarometer, 2005, p. 93). This could be an indication of a generally positive attitude to the idea of an EU identity, but personal hesitation to relate to it.

The above-mentioned findings are indicative of a trend which can be observed in Belgium, the UK and Bulgaria. While Belgians have an overwhelmingly positive attitude to the EU flag, British are divided in their perceptions of the EU. Bulgarians on their part, as citizens of a country in the process of negotiations of accession (at the time of the survey), are generally positive towards the idea of an EU flag but unwilling to identify with it on a personal level. These attitudes towards one of the intrinsic symbols of national identity are indicative of the attitudes to the identity itself. Belgians readily embrace the creation of an EU identity and are willing to associate with it. Britons are significantly more divided and reserved towards an EU identity, while Bulgarians approve of the idea as such but still do not feel a part of it.

Feeling European

The feeling of being European belongs to the voluntarist components of the national identity. It is an important indicator, as reaffirmed by the Eurobarometer issue 71. There question QE3 states: "And in terms of being European, among the following, what do you think are the most important characteristics?". The biggest significance was attributed to the feeling of being European, outweighing being born in the EU and sharing European cultural traditions.

The examination of the degree to which Belgian citizens feel European shows that 83% feel this way (Eurobarometer, 2010, p. 35). This is well above the average for the EU of 74%. The high degree to which Belgian citizens feel European is an indicator of the strong sense of belonging and identification with the EU which they have.

At the same time, only 48% of UK citizens say that they feel European. Not only does this fall significantly below the EU average, but it is also the lowest percentage scored in the survey. This is indicative of a weak feeling of belonging and reluctance to identify with the EU as a whole.

Bulgarian respondents were also tentative about expressing strong feelings as European: 59% said they feel European, which places them at the bottom of the chart and way below the EU average. Even though more than half of the Bulgarians say they feel European, the result is indicative of a relatively low degree of identification with the EU.

The results of this component reveal an interesting state of affairs. The feeling of having an identity pertains to the voluntarist components of national identity. Thus, it is important for the overall assessment of belonging or not to a certain identity, as well as to the strength of the identity in question among a certain group of people. The feeling of European-ness of Belgium citizens is considerably high, especially in comparison with the feeling of Britons. Bulgarian citizens are more reluctant to feel strongly European, but their result places them in between Belgians and British. These conclusions would be valuable for the overall assessment of the EU identity in the three countries with regard to the different identity components.

Attitudes towards the Constitution of the EU

Another test as to the attitudes of EU citizens towards the EU identities was provided by research on their opinions of the draft Constitution of the European Union. As mentioned before, the constitution is a powerful symbol with significant importance for the creation and existence of a national identity. A closer look at the research shows that Belgians are most supportive of the Constitution, with as much as 80% of interviewees declaring themselves in favor (Special Eurobarometer, 2005, p. 13). Even though a generally positive attitude is expected in Belgium as one of the founding members of what is now the EU, the percentage is indicative of the overwhelming support of the population for European integration.

At the same time, the support for the Constitution in the UK ranks lowest among all the EU member states and even below the candidate states. Just 37% of the population are in favour of a possible Constitution (Ibid., p. 13). Bulgarians expressed slightly higher support than the British – 48% said “yes” to the idea of a Constitution (Ibid., p. 13). However, this is less than the EU average of 61%. At the same time, bearing in mind that the country was not

yet a member of the EU at the time of the study, we can say that the result is an average one, especially since it outweighs some older member states.

When examining the reasons for these results and their relation to the topic of the paper, it is useful to consider the reasons for support given by the interviewees. The third reason in order of importance for people to support the draft Constitution is that it “strengthens the feeling of a European identity” (the first two reasons given are of institutional and technical nature). This is essential to the purposes of this analysis, as it shows that a vast majority of Belgians are highly supportive of an instrument to strengthen the European identity, the British are extremely reluctant towards it and Bulgarians are generally in favor, though not members of the EU at the time the research was conducted.

This builds upon the observations already made with regard to the feeling of belonging, expressed by Belgians, British and Bulgarians. A conclusion can be made that the Belgians feel a strong sense of belonging to the EU and are supportive of a further deepening of the integration process (81% measured in 2004 Eurobarometer), one of the main reasons being that it would strengthen the feeling in question and eventually assist the construction of an EU identity. The British feel significantly less attached to the EU and are therefore skeptical toward the undertaking of measures which would strengthen the feeling of that attachment (only 49% being in favour of further EU integration (Eurobarometer, 2004, p. 13)). Among the interviewed nationalities, they are the ones which are most reluctant to the adoption of an EU Constitution. Last but not least, Bulgarians express a strong feeling of belonging, while moderately supporting the adoption of the Constitution. Bearing in mind their candidacy status at the time of the survey, we can assume that the percentage of approval would be higher, were the survey to be conducted now.

Conclusions

In the paper, I studied the dimensions of different identity components in Belgium, the UK and Bulgaria. The main hypothesis was that the dimensions would vary between countries and differences would be observed on several lines. On the one hand, there would be differentiations between old and new member states, namely Belgium and the UK, and Bulgaria. On the other hand, there would also be variations among old member states themselves, exemplified by Belgium and the UK.

The research in the course of the paper has shown that these variations are indeed empirically observable. Respondents show a clear tendency to follow a certain pattern when sharing their views on the euro, the flag of the EU, their feeling of being European and the drafting of the EU Constitution. These four elements encompass both ascribed and voluntarist identity components, which allows us to gain a fairly full estimation of the EU identities shared by the respondents. Moreover, three of these four elements (the euro, the flag and the Constitution) are of symbolic nature, which reinforces their importance with respect to signifying and measuring European identities.

The conclusions which can be made are that old member states with a generally pro-European stance (Belgium) are more willing to favour symbols of European identity and to embrace such an identity. What is more, respondents expressed a favourable attitude towards deepening the integration process and strengthening the EU identity. They had no fears about this process and readily identified with it.

However, UK citizens are significantly more reluctant to identify with the European idea. They do not consider the euro as an important symbol, are remarkably split in their views of the EU, are the EU member state which feels least European and the ones least in favour of an EU Constitution. This is an interesting ascertainment which is indicative of their unwillingness to identify with the EU and the weakness of the European identity among them.

As a newly accessed member state, the results shown by Bulgarian respondents are interesting in several ways. First of all, Bulgarians have a generally positive attitude towards the EU. They favour its symbols and support further integration. However, fewer Bulgarians feel European in comparison with the EU average. This might be caused by the fact that the country has been an EU member for less than 5 years but at the same time it indicates a potential for a strong EU identity to build up among Bulgarians, having in mind that for most indicators they gave stronger responses than some older member states like the UK.

Thus, the EU identities vary – not only between old and new member states, but also among old member states themselves. These variations might have different explanations. Due to restrictions of the size of the paper and its focus, I will not dwell on them in detail. However, I will mention a few options that might provide viable reasons for the variations observed. First of all, there is the history of the relationship of the country with the EU. Belgium is a traditional proponent of EU integration, and as one of the founding members, is one of the propelling forces of the integration process as a whole. By

contrast, the relationship of the UK with the EU is far more uneven, marked by periods of closer cooperation and more distanced relations. Bulgaria, as a fairly new member, is still in the process of discovery of the real meaning of the EU and internalizing the Union, which can lead to lower degrees of identification. Another factor in this consideration is the perception about the gains for a country from its membership. Citizens of countries which perceive their states as gaining from EU membership are more willing to identify strongly with the Union in comparison with citizens of states which feel they contribute excessively without adequate return. Furthermore, the perception of the importance of the integration process would be another factor in determining the attitudes of citizens. In addition to that, some states might feel the deepening of the integration as a historical necessity whereas others might perceive it as excessive loss of national sovereignty. The media presentation of the EU is also an important factor for the perceptions of citizens of the EU and the formation of EU identities. Other reasons might include the strength of the national identity, the presence or lack of regional identities, the specific national history of the state, the changes in the country observed as a result of EU membership and more. This might be a fruitful realm for further research, which falls outside the scope of the current paper.

The careful examination of varying EU identities and the reasons for those would provide an opportunity for much more specific policies at the EU level. Such research-based policies would consider the specificities of each particular country and provide for tailored approaches to cater for those specificities. The eventual result would be the overall strengthening of EU identities. However, that should not be mistaken for the unification of those identities. As shown, identities vary significantly among member states and it is highly unlikely that this would change. What is more, there is no necessity of aiming to unify the EU identities. One of the unique features and treasures of the EU is its diversity, so efforts should be focused on strengthening the EU identities with respect for the country specificities instead of unifying them. Such an approach would facilitate the existence of a rich, strong and unique EU with various dimensions of EU identities within it, united in its diversity.

References

- Billig, M. (2004). *Banal Nationalism*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Jones, F.L., & Smith, S. (2001). Individual and Societal Bases of National Identity. A Comparative Multi-Level Analysis. *European Sociological Review*, 17(2), 103-118.
- McNamara, K. (2010). Constructing Europe: Insights from Historical Sociology. *Comparative European Politics* (2010) 8, 127–142. doi:10.1057/cep.2010.8
- Smith, A. (1991). *National Identity*, London: Penguin Groups.
- Eurobarometer, issue 62, Public opinion in the European Union (2005).
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb_62_en.pdf
- Eurobarometre, issue 62, L'Opinion publique dans l'Union Europeenne, Rapport National Belgique (Automne 2004).
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62_be_fr_nat.pdf
- Eurobarometer, issue 62, Public opinion in the European Union, National Report United Kindgom (Autumn 2004).
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62_uk_nat.pdf
- Евробарометър, брой 62, Общественото мнение в Европейския съюз, Национален Доклад за България (Есен 2004).
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62_bg_nat.pdf
- Eurobarometer, issue 62, Public opinion in the European Union, National Report Executive Summary Belgium (Autumn 2004).
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62_be_exec.pdf
- Eurobarometer, issue 62, Public opinion in the European Union, National Report Executive Summary United Kingdom (Autumn 2004).
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62_uk_exec.pdf
- Eurobarometer, issue 62, Public opinion in the European Union, National Report Executive Summary Bulgaria (Autumn 2004).
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62_bg_exec.pdf
- Eurobarometer, issue 70, Public opinion in the European Union (2010).
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb70/eb70_full_en.pdf
- Eurobarometer, issue 71, Future of Europe (2010).
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb71/eb713_future_europe.pdf
- Special Eurobarometer, Barometric questions (2005).
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_220_en.pdf