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The Political Identity of the European Union: Complement or Overcoming of National Identity?

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Abstract

The European Union finds itself in a paradoxical situation: The Lisbon Treaty is supposed to provide it with new impetus and institutional capacity for becoming a global power, however, confronted with current events in world politics, the bloc seems to be more disunited than ever. Regardless of a 60-year long process of integration, citizens still seem to identify more with their nation-states than with the European Union, all the more so under the auspices of the current economic crisis. For a long time, analysts and politicians thought that a "permissive consensus" among the citizens would allow the elites to push forward the integration process step by step. However, since the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty through the French and Dutch population, this no longer seems to be the case. The paper explores the central themes of the debate around a European identity, discusses the different propositions and concepts put forward by intellectuals and academics, and examines their current relevance. It scrutinizes the relation between national and European identity, pointing out that the nation state and the European Union are ultimately competitors for sovereignty and identity. Thus, a political identity of the European Union can only grow if the member states renounce more of their sovereignty.

Introduction

"*Nous sommes tous des Américains*" - "We are all Americans" was the headline of the French newspaper *Le Monde* after the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 (Colombani 2001). The often quoted statement was reminiscent of a period when Europeans defined their political identity as being part of an Atlantic community: Since the end of World War II, the US

and Western Europe had thought they were not only sharing the same values, but also common experiences in the past and common interests in the present (Deutsch et al. 1957; Battistella 2003/4). Pledging transatlantic solidarity under the auspices of the terrorist attacks, the newspaper continued this vision: The threat scenario of the Cold War had made a place for the new menaces of the 21st century, which concerned Europeans and Americans to the same degree.

The years following September 11th showed that the potential for transatlantic strife was bigger than thought: The responses which the Bush administration gave to the terrorist threat made lots of continental Europeans believe that the period of commonly shared values and interests belonged to the past. Also, political rhetoric and discourse constructed a sharp contradiction between American and European perceptions of the world, suggesting that peace-loving Europeans lived on Venus, while realistic Americans lived on Mars (Kagan 2003). Though the election of Obama made Europeans feel again closer to their transatlantic ally, the reactions on the killing of Osama bin Laden showed the gap between mentalities on both sides of the Atlantic: While crowds were cheering on New York's Times Square, Angela Merkel was severely criticized for expressing her “joy” about the death of bin Laden (Erlanger, 2011).

Thus, the question arises: Have Europeans since the end of the Cold War, with the consolidation of the EU, its common currency and its successive enlargements, become more conscious of their Europeanness? Do they identify with the EU as a distinct political identity? And has the EU gained visibility as a coherent international actor? The current situation seems paradoxical in a number of ways: First, the EU has gained more and more impact on the daily life of its citizens. But the Union seems to inspire less and less confidence: For the first time in its history, the spring 2010 Eurobarometer recorded a situation where distrust of the European Union outweighed trust (Eurobarometer 73 2010). Only half of the citizens believe that the membership of their country in the EU is a good thing. Eurosceptic parties, like the French Front national or the True Finns are recently scoring electoral successes[1]. Also, the Lisbon Treaty produced paradoxical results: It was meant to give more coherence to the EU's actions in the international arena, however, the reactions to the revolutions in the Maghreb region showed the Union again in its well-known discordance and polyphony, with Germany not supporting the UN resolution to protect the Libyan civilian population, and four different protagonists claiming to speak for the bloc.

Thus, three different questions arise which I would like to address in my paper:

I) Why should there be a European identity? Do we need a European identity?

II) What is its relation to national identity?

III) How can a European identity be fostered?

I

Before treating the first question, I should define what I mean by a European identity: I am referring to a *political* identity, thus the identification with the European Union as a political community. Hence, my essay is not elaborating on identification with the European continent, a certain way of life or a distinct civilization. People can very well identify with those cultural elements without embracing the project of the European Union. Countries intensely shaped by a European culture and lifestyle (like Switzerland) can stay adamantly skeptical of the project of European integration. I do acknowledge, however, that an attachment to those cultural values can potentially increase the support for the European Union.

For a long period, the attachment of citizens to the project of European integration was considered as not being very important. The unification process was regarded as an elite-driven process, managed by forward-looking statesmen and -women, civil servants, industrialists, trade unionists etc. When launching new ideas for Europe, Jean Monnet, the founding father of the community, went to see the pivotal people in each member state in order to gain their support (Waechter, 2011). As long as those societal leaders went along with the process, it wouldn't be at risk, as the citizens would follow. The integration process could remain an elite-driven process, as long as it was accompanied by a tacit, unengaged support on the part of the citizens. Political scientists have named this attitude the *permissive consensus*: European citizens, according to this concept, let the integration process happen, as they didn't feel very strongly about it: Neither did they feel the need to block its further advances, nor did they feel passionately attached to it (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970). Under those circumstances, a European political identity was not needed, as the citizens' involvement in the process remained very limited.

From the 1990s onwards, however, the scope of European integration significantly changed. Previously being mainly a market-making venture, it turned into a full-blown political project touching upon issues with increasing

relevance for the political identity of the citizens. A common currency, common borders with common rules on entry and the challenge of creating a common foreign and security policy made the EU into a much more identity-sensitive community than it used to be, when it was mainly concerned with issues like agriculture, competition and regional development. The result is an increasing *politicization* of European issues: They are no longer reserved for an arena of elite actors, but enter the normal domestic fora of political debate and decision-making. The public becomes more and more aware of European integration and wants to have its say in this process. We have moved, as Liesbeth Hooghe and Gary Marks argue, from a *permissive consensus* to a *constraining dissensus*: The public is no longer an innocuous and lenient observer of European integration, but has become an involved actor, on whose support no politician can tacitly count (Hooghe & Marks, 2008). This has become dramatically evident in the referenda on the constitutional treaty in 2005. The fact that citizens care more about European integration than before, and that EU issues become more politicized, should at first not be regarded as a negative development: On the contrary, an intense public debate about issues like the constitutional treaty could give evidence of the existence of a European identity. However, we can observe that the politicization of the EU provides increasing room for such groupings, which unconditionally oppose the integration process by arguing that it threatens the nation state and national identity (Weßels, 2007). This seems to me the current scenario, which makes the issue of European identity increasingly salient: The European integration process has become more politicized, which, however, has not yet led to a more passionate support for this project, but has rather given space for an articulate opposition based on nationalism.

II

Thus, the question arises: What, exactly, is the relation between national identity and European identity? Nationalism and the nation-state are among the most powerful, shaping forces of modern times. For the vast majority of political and social movements in the world, the nation remains the primordial frame of reference, and the majority of European citizens primarily identify with their nation states as the community they feel most attached to. Hence, is it realistic to expect that citizens will identify with a community larger than their nation-state? Is a supra-national identity achievable? Can nations and the nation-state be superseded? Authors have given contradictory answers to this question. In the age of globalization, authors like David Held and Martin

Albrow argue that the world has become increasingly denationalized: the key problems of our times transcend the borders of the nation-state, which is less and less capable of controlling action on its territory and becomes more and more insignificant (Albrow, 1996; Held, 2002). The challenge of our times is hence to realize democratic governance on a supranational scale. For others, like Anthony D. Smith, there are no serious indications that the nation-state will loose its significance: Not only does nationalism remain powerful in Europe, the continent which gave birth to it, but it has been exported all over the world in the course of the 20th century. "There is no area unaffected by nationalist protest or free of the nation. (...) No other principle of government, no other organization of collective economic activity, no other criterion of culture and identity, is seriously considered today (...) . The nation and nationalism, accommodated or not, separately or together, will, it seems, continue to provide humanity with its basic cultural and political identities and political organizations well into the next century" (Smith, 1990, p. 24).

The advocates of a European identity (or better: a EU identity) hold that there is no contradiction between an attachment to the nation state and to Europe. The motto of the EU is "Unity within diversity"; hence, a sense of belonging to one's nation can very well coexist with a strong support of European integration. Each individual, they argue, has multiple identities, going from the personal, family level over an attachment to one's home town, region, to the nation and finally to Europe as the all-embracing entity. Thomas Risse, one of the proponents of this viewpoint, gives the images of the marble-cake or the Russian matruska doll in order to describe how an individual can have multi-layered identities. According to Risse and others, European identity can be fostered through a constructive process not very different from the process of nation-building. The modern nations were shaped in a conscious process of social construction, which took place from the top to the bottom: elites shaped and spread discourses, which were supposed to create among individuals of different origins the feeling of being part of the same community (Risse, 2003; Risse, 2005). Europe, according to this view, can become an "imagined community" as rich and powerful as the nation [2]. The construction of a European identity will and should not eradicate attachment to the nation; it will just complement the citizens' identity with a supplementary level.

This seems to me a somewhat idyllic vision of the coexistence of European and national identity. First, it remains too focused on the cultural elements of identity. The cultural markers of our identity can indeed very well

live next to each other, and it is a statement of the obvious to say that each individual would describe his or her identity by referring to multiple layers not excluding each other. Second, it gives an incomplete account of the process of nation-building, which was not only a top-down discursive process of constructing collective identities, but also a pervasive socio-economic process, built on a fundamental political act: The acquisition of sovereignty through a community of individuals which claimed to be a nation. Acquiring sovereignty - this meant owning all the fundamental attributes of statehood and exercising an invasive, benevolent, educating or coercive impact on the lives of the citizens. Because of sovereignty and the ownership of all instruments of statehood, nations could be built: A national language could be taught to the detriment of regional dialects and minority languages. An infrastructure could be constructed which made it possible for people to meet each other. An economy could be developed and an administration could be created. The process of nation-building made “peasants into Frenchmen”, as Eugen Weber showed in his exemplary study, because it went along with modernization, industrialization, and bureaucratization (Weber, 1976). Citizens became attached to their nation not only because of cultural features and the power of a national mythology, but because it provided them with opportunities and upward mobility. Thus, the idea of superseding nationalism by a discourse of Europeanness seems innocuous, as it doesn't take into account how much the nation has become part of our modern society, the individual biographies and daily lives of the citizens.

III

How, then, can a European identity be fostered? How can the public support, which the EU more and more needs, be generated? How can we avoid that the nation remains for many citizens the one and only frame of political reference? Politicians and intellectuals have made various propositions on this issue. Among the most influential was and is the idea that the EU needs a constitution. Only a constitution, argued Jürgen Habermas in 2001, will create a Europe-wide public sphere with transnational media and political parties. The constitutionalization of Europe, according to Habermas, would create among its citizens a “constitutional patriotism”, very much like Western Germans after 1949 identified with their constitution, the “Grundgesetz”, rather than with the German nation (Habermas, 2001). A European constitution remains to be created: The constitutional treaty, even if it hadn't failed in the French and Dutch referenda of 2005, would not have

earned the name of a constitution, since it lacked its pivotal feature - a founding subject in the form of a sovereign people. Up to now, there is no European *demos* constituting the sovereign of Europe and replacing its current sovereign - the *peoples* of the European Union.

Other authors focus on Europeanization as an incremental process progressively creating a European identity. This multifaceted term can refer to a variety of developments: It can hint at the domestic impact of European integration, the consequences of European legislation, its sometimes unintended side-effects (Börzel & Risse, 2000). The fact that 27 member states have to follow the same rules makes them arguably more alike and thus increases their identity. Europeanization can also refer to the actor socialization on the European level, an interaction leading to the creation of trans-national networks of politicians, administrators, societal interest and advocacy groups (Meyer, 2010). Finally, Europeanization can also refer to the accession process, in which the candidate countries have to implement a myriad of European norms into domestic legislation in order to fulfill the criteria for membership (Lippert & Umbach, 2005). The accession process is meant to transfer not only laws, but also those values, which the EU considers as its heritage to the enlargement countries. The enduring effects of Europeanization are, however, difficult to measure: Some countries back-pedal after having achieved full membership, by scrapping legislation, which they had implemented previously under EU pressure.

The failing compliance of old and new member states to maintain common standards highlights the fundamental problem of European integration: Europeanization which earns its name only takes place in those policy fields in which member states abandon their sovereignty. As long as they keep sovereignty and only pledge to cooperate, there is always the possibility that an incoming government changes policies according to electoral support and ideological preferences. Only the delegation of legislation and implementing authority to supranational institutions guarantees that 27 member states follow the same rules. When I apply this logic to our topic of European identity, I would argue: Only the abandonment of national sovereignty makes European identity -*understood as a political identity* - possible: Political identity follows sovereignty. Citizens identify with those authorities taking the ultimate, binding decisions on a matter. A European public sphere can only become a reality when those matters which citizens are most interested in - taxes, social security, education - become matters of decision-making on a European level. Jean Monnet understood this very well

when he opted for coal and steel as the then pivotal sectors of the economy in order to start European integration. Integrating the production and regulation of coal and steel, Monnet thought, would deal a decisive blow to state sovereignty. Other sectors would necessarily follow, and the end product would be a united Europe. As soon as a supranational authority would take over legislation and control of policy fields, the citizens would *shift their loyalty* to this supranational authority (Haas, 2004). From today's perspective, we can say: a shift of loyalty has taken place, but only for those sectors where sovereignty has been delegated to the European level. Many pivotal policy fields remain purely national, thus, the citizens naturally turn to the nation when they want to defend their interests concerning pensions, schools, universities, unemployment benefits, foreign policy; and they are right to do so, because for those issues the nation-state remains the "terminal community" (Carey, 2002). An example should illustrate this important point: The European Union has run, for more than two decades, its own program targeted to university students: Erasmus. It has largely increased mobility among students and has certainly made many of them more aware of the diversity of Europe. However, it has not created a common political identity in the sense of "shift of loyalty" among Europe's students. They still turn to national or regional authorities when they want to improve their study conditions or influence the design of educational policies. As long as Europe won't achieve significant competences on this matter, students will continue to do so. As long as the pooling of sovereignty remains incomplete, a European political identity will always remain rudimentary. In a widely read book, Alan Milward claimed that European integration meant the "rescue of the nation-state" (Milward, 2000). According to him, in the immediate post-war period Europeans decided to cooperate and to pool decision-making, because they became acutely aware of the incapacity of the nation-state to manage its imminent problems. Ultimately, however, the nation-state and the EU are competitors, because they compete for the same treasures: sovereignty and identity. European integration, taken seriously, means a constant erosion of national sovereignty, and thus a constant loss of a national political identity, to the benefit of a growing European identity.

Endnotes

[1] In the Finnish parliamentary elections of 2011, the “True Finns” obtained 39 seats and became the third largest party. In the French regional elections of 2010, the Front national obtained a nation-wide average of 11,4 %.
[2] Benedict Anderson has described nations as “imagined communities” (Anderson 2006).

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