

History, Memory and the Construction of a European Identity*

Aline Sierp

TABLE OF CONTENTS: 1. Introduction; – 2. The notion of European Identity; – 3. European identity – a problem of definition; – 4. Components of European identity; – 5. European identity – the institutional perspective; – 6. European identity – mobilization from below; – 7. Conclusions.

1. Introduction

The European Union is currently going through one of the deepest series of crises since its inception. It seems as if the sequence of calamities affecting the Union has not faltered in the past 15 years: starting with the European debt crisis in 2008, followed by the refugee crisis, the Brexit crisis, the Corona crisis and, latest, the energy crisis in wake of the Ukraine war. In view of the difficulties faced by the EU trying to grapple with those emergencies, the question of what Europe is, what it stands for and how to imagine it has become more relevant than ever. The current set of crises are not only of economic or political character. They were brought up by the question of solidarity and values. Both elements were very prominent in the Greek crisis. They also occupy a conspicuous place in the migration debate, the questionable deal with Turkey and the right approach to radical Islamist groups. Moreover, they underlie the Brexit discussions, the Corona emergency, and debates on the war in Ukraine.

In many ways, what we are observing here is a crisis over the distinctiveness of the European Union, over its democratic legitimacy, and beyond that, over the obligations and responsibilities Europeans have towards one another. In short: it is a crisis of European identity. At the same

* Contribution for the Proceedings of the VIII Annual Conference of Diritti Comparati “Costituzione e identità nella prospettiva europea/Constitution and Identity in the European Perspective”, University of Roma 3, November 10th 2022.

time, however, we can observe a puzzling paradox: while the EU seems to fall apart and national interests seem to prevail, Europe is at the same time being evoked as the one entity that has the capacity to resist the “Other”. In the following, I will give a cursory overview and map some of the existing scholarly discussions and debates on the concept of European identity¹. I will furthermore offer a short overview of the activities of the EU in this realm in order to trace the development of EU policies aimed at creating a European sense of belonging.

2. The notion of European Identity

The concept of European identity is not new. Neither is it uncontested. Since at least the 1990s the notion of European identity has been criticized as being essentialist, exceptionalist, and exclusive². Postmodernism has even cast doubt on the ethics of posing the question of its existence in the first place³. There are several reasons why European identification is a highly relevant, and at the same time debated, topic. I have already alluded to some reasons in the introduction. It has become commonplace to assert the disjuncture presented by the accelerated drive for integration on the one hand and the manifest absence of a popular European will on the other⁴. Observing political discourses of the last months, we can notice that both supporters and opponents of the EU deplore that the citizens of the European Union have had little say in major political changes made in their name, and that one of the most prominent problems of the EU is the fact that its institutions lack accountability. (One

¹ The literature on European identity is extensive, making it impossible to give a complete overview within the scope of this publication. The following will thus need to be understood as a cursory overview based on a limited selection.

² G. Delanty, *The limits and possibilities of a European identity: A critique of cultural essentialism*, in *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 21(4), 1995, p. 15–36.

³ S. Ivic and D.D. Lakicevic, *European identity: between modernity and postmodernity*, in *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 24(4), 2011, p. 395-407.

⁴ R.S. Katz, *Models of democracy: elite attitudes and the democratic deficit in the European Union*, in *European Union Politics* 2(1), 2001, p. 53-79; F. Decker, *Governance beyond the nation-state. Reflections on the democratic deficit of the European Union*, in *Journal of European Public Policy* 9(2), 2002, p. 256-272; C. Crombez, *The democratic deficit in the European Union: Much ado about nothing?*, in *European Union Politics* 4(1), 2003, p. 101-120.

of the best examples of this being the violent reactions during the Greek debt crisis).

The idea of the European Union as being an undemocratic, cumbersome institution, threatening the sovereignty and identity of the nation-states within, has certainly not appeared only in the last years⁵. This reading of the EU has returned cyclically after each treaty change and was particularly strong in the aftermath of the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty⁶. However, even if it is not new, it has returned with major force in the past months. The growing popularity of the many Eurosceptic parties (may it be the Front National in France, UKIP in the UK, the FPÖ in Austria, Jobbik in Hungary, the Law and Justice Party in Poland, the AfD in Germany or Fratelli d'Italia) are an obvious expression of the growing gap between the EU and its citizens⁷.

What is European identity and what does the EU do to foster it? In the following, I will flesh out some of the policies the EU put forward to generate a sense of belonging to this entity that has become such a big target of criticism lately.

3. European identity – a problem of definition

The first problem we encounter when we talk about European identity is the question of what we mean with “Europe”: Is it the continent (perceived in geographical, historical or cultural terms) or the politico-economic structure known as the EU? Do we talk about a “European identity” or an “EU identity”? The second question is much more fundamental and is the question whether a European identity actually exists. A number of scholars continue to be skeptical and affirm that European identity is rather a theoretical construction than a “reality”, just as Europe has always been more of a mental construct than a geographical or social

⁵ N. Copey, *Rethinking the European Union*, London, 2015; Simon Hix, *What's Wrong with the Europe Union and How to Fix it*, Hoboken, 2013.

⁶ G. Ivaldi, *Beyond France's 2005 referendum on the European constitutional treaty: Second-order model, anti-establishment attitudes and the end of the alternative European utopia*, in *West European Politics* 29(1), 2006, p. 47-69; L. Hooghe and G. Marks, *Europe's blues: Theoretical soul-searching after the rejection of the European Constitution*, in *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39(2), 2006, p. 247-250.

⁷ One could also see it the other way around: Euroscepticism may well be a response to rising symbolic power of the EU and European identity. However, discussing this would exceed the scope of this paper.

entity»⁸. The lack of public identification with the EU is usually explained, on the one hand, with the lack of communication and discursive structures that make political community possible, and, on the other hand, with «the lack of transparency in its procedures»⁹.

However, there are a number of scholars who demonstrated empirically that a sense of European identity has begun to develop lately and that increasing numbers of Europeans identify in one way or another with Europe and the European community¹⁰. They believe that an important percentage of European citizens «incorporate Europe into their sense of identity», and that they hold «Europeanized national identities, if only as a secondary identity»¹¹. Even European law formally refers to the concept of a European identity. Article 6 paragraph 3 of the Treaty on European Union, reads as follows: «The Union shall respect the national identities of its Member States». Article. 2, by contrast, states that the Union shall set itself the objective to «assert its identity on the international scene», implying the existence of an EU identity. If this was the case, then what kind of identity are we dealing with? Or put differently: are there different components of a European identity?

4. Components of European identity

The distinction usually used is the one between a civic versus a cultural European identity¹². By civic identity the «degree to which Europeans feel that they are citizens of a European political system, whose rules, laws, and rights have an influence on their daily life» is habitually

⁸ D. Lowenthal, «European Identity»: *An Emerging Concept*, in *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 46(3), 2000, p. 314-321; M. Castells, *The construction of European identity*, in M.J. Rodrigues (ed.), *The new knowledge economy in Europe. A strategy for international competitiveness and social cohesion*. Cheltenham, 2002, p. 232-241.

⁹ M. J. Baun, *An imperfect Union: The Maastricht Treaty and the new politics of European integration*, Boulder, CO, 1996; Desmond Dinan, *Institutions and Governance 2001–02: Debating the EU's Future*, in *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, 2002, p. 29-43.

¹⁰ P. Gillespie and B. Laffan, *European Identity: Theory and Empirics*, in: M. Cini and A.K. Bourne (eds.), *Palgrave Advances in European Union Studies*, London, 2006; J.T. Checkel and P.J. Katzenstein (eds.), *European Identity*, Cambridge, 2009.

¹¹ T. Risse, *A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres*, Ithaca, 2010, p. 6.

¹² G. Delanty, *Models of citizenship: Defining European identity and citizenship*, in *Citizenship studies* 1(3), 1997, p. 285-303.

meant¹³. This component of identity is quite close to Habermas's "constitutional patriotism"¹⁴. Cultural identity on the other hand, refers to the perceived level of sameness with other Europeans. It is defined as the «individuals' perception that fellow Europeans are closer to them than non-Europeans [...] regardless of the nature of the political system»¹⁵.

This is a very simplified distinction. Other scholars propose a much more nuanced definition and further break down the civic versus cultural identity nexus. Franz Mayer and Jan Palmowski for example distinguish between five identities: historical, cultural, constitutional, legal and institutional¹⁶. *Historical identity* presupposes a degree of similarity that is determined by an ensemble of cultural, religious, economic and ideological factors that have led to the creation of certain narratives. The authors content that there is currently no common European historical identity that would shape the European integration process. On the contrary, historical memory remains largely a national affair, leading to division instead of homogenization. Closely connected to historical identity is *cultural identity*. The authors argue that Europe was not very successful in creating cultural symbols of its own: there is no common language and they think it is questionable if a common heritage of classical music and visual arts is really a European hallmark. If there is a real defining characteristic, then it is maybe Europe's cultural diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity, rather than its communality. The idea of a *constitutional identity* emanates mainly from the early years of European integration during which there was the ambition to create a constitutional identity as the foundation of an overarching European identity. The failure of the constitutional treaty in 2005 was a decisive blow to this idea. However, the authors argue, there is a constitutional identity that expresses itself not so much in a constitutional text but in terms of constitutional features (like for example the primacy of EU law) that shape the moral and political identity of the European demos. *Institutional identity* according to the authors is together with legal identity the strongest component of a European identity. They refer to the (surprisingly) high public approval for EU institutions and the fact that they were able to

¹³ M. Bruter, *Winning hearts and minds for Europe: The impact of news and symbols on civic and cultural European identity*, in *Comparative political studies* 36(10), 2003, p. 1148-1179;

¹⁴ J. Habermas, *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung. Die apologetischen Tendenzen in der deutschen Zeitgeschichtsschreibung*, in *Die Zeit*, 11 July 1986.

¹⁵ M. Bruter, *Winning hearts and minds for Europe: The impact of news and symbols on civic and cultural European identity*, in *Comparative political studies* 36(10), 2003, p. 1148-1179

¹⁶ F. Mayer and J. Palmowski, *European Identities and the EU - The Ties that Bind the Peoples of Europe*, in *Journal of Common Market Studies* 42(3), 2004, p. 573-598.

become carriers of a European historical myth. *Legal identity* at the same time is expressed by the European Court of Justice as independent institution that strives to articulate «a general popular consensus» and thus substantive aspects of European identity based on human rights and the rule of law.

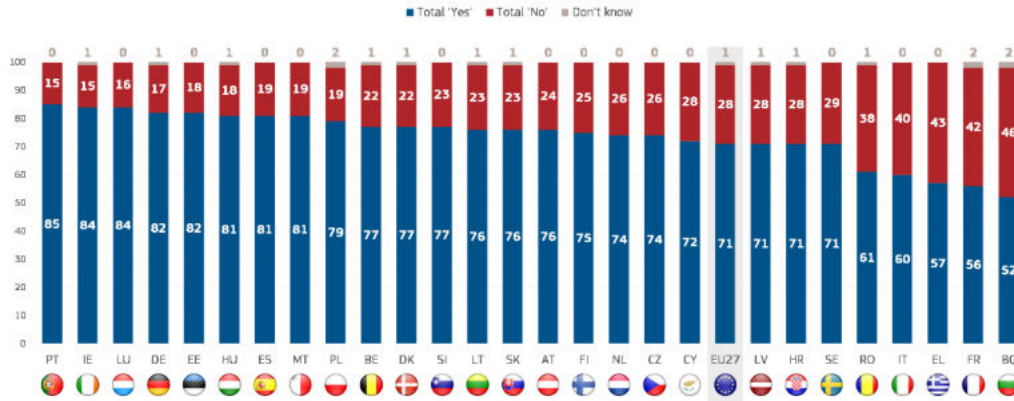
Let's unpack this a bit further by questioning some of the assumptions the authors have made. The idea of a constitutional, institutional and legal identity corresponds to what others have called the “civic European identity” mentioned before: the component that appeals to citizens’ reason. Whereas historical and cultural identity can be subsumed under “cultural identity”: the component driven by collective images and symbols. The latter component is probably the most volatile and most difficult to catch. However, I do not agree with the authors that it does not exist or that it did not play a role in the European integration process. While it is true that the EU to a certain extent hegemonizes civic identity with the emphasis on democracy, human rights and a market economy, its efforts have shifted over time towards the promotion of cultural identity. Interestingly, the idea that historical or cultural identity is an insignificant component of Europeans’ feelings of belonging does not correspond to the findings of the Eurobarometer either.

In most countries, more than 70% feel they are citizens of the EU. When asked, which issues are the ones that most create a feeling of community among EU citizens, Culture is named first (27%) together with the Economy (22%) and History (21%)¹⁷. To be able to put those results into context we need to analyse what the EU institutions have done so far in order to foster a European identity.

¹⁷ Eurobarometer 83 Spring 2015, available at europa.eu.

Figure 1: Eurobarometer SB 96, 2021-22

QC2.1 For each of the following statements, please tell to what extent it corresponds or not to your own opinion.
(% - You feel you are a citizen of the EU)



5. European identity – the institutional perspective

The question of identity was “discovered” in the 1970s, when elites realized that people «could not fall in love with a market»¹⁸. A “Declaration on European Identity” was adopted in 1973 at the Copenhagen Summit but was met with little resonance among European citizens. The birth of an explicit cultural policy and the introduction of the concept of cultural heritage in 1974 was more successful in this regard. It was the first active attempt to incarnate a European identity beyond abstract political principles by drawing the cultural boundaries of the community and thus providing it with content¹⁹. It was no coincidence that this idea first appeared in the 1970s. The design of a cultural policy had a clear teleological and legitimizing function after the EEC had been struggling with a period later termed Eurosclerosis. The newly devised cultural policies closely connected heritage to values. Those were first mainly related to Christianity and to Greek or Roman heritage sites. The European Capitals of Culture Programme is very emblematic in this respect. It describes cultural assets as

¹⁸ J. Delors, *Statement on the broad lines of Commission policy*, in *Bulletin of the European Communities Supplement*, No 1, 1989, p. 6.

¹⁹ See the first mention of this in the 1973 Copenhagen Declaration on European identity: *The European identity*, in *Bulletin of the European Communities*, No 12, 1973, p. 118.

transnational and a-political and thus as the perfect basis for popular support, solidarity and identity²⁰.

In the 1980s heritage policies were seen as a tool to defend local diversity against the homogenizing effects of globalisation. In this context, it was the regulatory politics of the internal market and the imminent launch of the single currency that acquired an identity dimension. In addition, the protection of social heritage (seeing it as traces of man's achievements) and of minority culture came to the fore. The EU was a forerunner in this respect, it dealt with those issues much earlier than many other international organisations²¹.

In the 1990s, the issue of diversity became important. This was the moment intercultural dialogue as concept appeared for the first time. In addition, the appearance of negative heritage concerning especially World War II (i.e. the appearance of concentration camp memorial sites in the list of heritage sites that warrant protection) signals the move to a more inclusive heritage frame. The reasons for this development were most likely the reaction to various changes the EU was progressively subject to and that emphasised questions about Europe's boundaries and the limits of membership: increased migration, cultural globalisation and the Eastern enlargement. It was also a response to the concept of European citizenship introduced by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 which was seen as too restrictive to be able to form a basis for the identification of citizens with the EU. All of this indicated the move from the substantiation of a European culture to the definition of a value-framed dialogue. The boundaries of European identity in this context were not drawn in terms of the adherence of a European culture or history any more but rather in terms of a common set of values that all Europeans abide by.

6. European identity – mobilization from below

That this was successful to a certain extent can be seen by the amount of mobilisation in favour of a European identity in the 1990s. The Historical Archives of the European Union in Florence are full of documents, letters and discussion protocols debating the possibility of a

²⁰ K.K. Patel (Ed.), *The Cultural Politics of Europe. European Capitals of Culture and European Union since the 1980s*, London, 2013.

²¹ O. Calligaro, *From 'European Cultural Heritage' to 'Cultural Diversity'?: The Changing Core Values of European Cultural Policy*, in *Politique Européenne*, 45, 2014, p. 60-85.

European identity. In 1995 the “Charter of European identity”, which was drafted by the Europa Union, appeared. It was not a single initiative but the result of the active involvement of several lobby groups, among them the European Union of Journalists and the European Federation for Education and Science who debated the prospect of a European identity, citizenship and public space throughout the 1990s. To the politics of interest, the politics of participation and belonging were added.

Most of the empirical evidence concerning bottom-up movements and how individual Europeans respond to the efforts by the European Union, comes from the Eurobarometer surveys already quoted above. They have asked the same questions over time concerning the degree of attachment of citizens to different territorial units²². The surveys reveal the same kind of distinction between civic and cultural components of European identity highlighted in the theoretical debate. Survey results indicate that attachment to Europe as a cultural geographical concept tends to be higher than attachment to the EU as an evolving polity. At the same time for most Europeans there is no perceived trade-off or incompatibility between national and European identity. They accept the multiplicity of identities that have fittingly been described as «marble cake» by some scholars²³. Over time the percentage of citizens describing their own identity as “national and European” increased while those choosing “national only” decreased. However, there remains a significant number of Europeans for whom an exclusive national identity is sufficient. This group does not only fail to identify with Europe or the EU, it also opposes its creation and development. Opposition to the EU and open Euroscepticism is not only a matter for individual citizens of course. It finds expression in political parties and anti-EU groups. And it contributes to the ongoing debates on Europe that have characterised the recent crises mentioned at the beginning of this article.

²² J. Citrin and J. Sides, *More than Nationals: How Identity Choice Matters in the New Europe*, in R.K. Herrmann, T. Risse, and M. B. Brewer (Eds.), *Transnational Identities. Becoming European in the EU*, Lanham, 2004, p. 161–185.

²³ T. Risse, *A Community of Europeans?: Transnational Identities and Public Spheres*. Ithaca, 2010

7. Conclusions

While public mobilisation is habitually interpreted as the manifestation of the growing dissatisfaction with the European Union, it equally demonstrates the increasing levels of engagement with the EU as a polity. During the Greek debt crisis and the Ukraine crisis reporters commented on the fact that the EU flag was omnipresent. It was used by activists on the Maidan Square in Kiev during the Ukraine uprising, shortly before the war broke out and it was repeatedly burned by demonstrators on the Syntagma square in Athens during demonstrations against the austerity measures imposed by the EU. Identity (both civic and cultural) is carried by symbols. The most evident symbol of the EU is the European flag. I would argue that as long as people are engaging with an entity, either by showing their desire to belong to it (Ukraine), or by their opposition to its policies (Greece), we can safely assume that some level of identification exists.

ABSTRACT: This paper gives a concise overview of the notion of European identity. It maps some of the existing scholarly discussions and debates on the concept and furthermore offers a short outline of the activities of the EU in this realm. Starting with highlighting some of the main issues encountered when researching European identity, it offers a possible solution by breaking the term further down into its different components. It proceeds by analyzing the EU institutional perspective in order to trace the development of EU policies aimed at creating a European sense of belonging

KEYWORDS: European identity - European integration – democratic legitimacy - memory

Aline Sierp – Associate Professor in European Studies, Maastricht University (aline.sierp@maastrichtuniversity.nl)