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On European Identity: Origins, Challenges and Prospects

ABSTRACT

This article elaborates on the ideas surrounding the concept of European identity by looking both at the official documents of the European Union and academic literature on the topic. The analysis offered points out that the concept itself is highly questionable, not only because it does not offer a clear definition or limitations of such an identity and thus challenges further theorizing and applicability in practice, but also since it runs the risk of alienating the constituent parties and the peoples of the present European polity even further.

Key words: European Union, European identity, Europeans, non-Europeans.

Introduction

Questions such as ‘What is Europe?’, ‘Who is European and who is not?’, and ‘Is a European identity possible?’ are heard regularly. Nowadays, the term ‘Europe’ is often used as a synonym for the European Union, thus to describe the process of European integration, a project that initially characterized the post-Second World War progress in Western Europe. The six signatories of the 1957 Treaty of Rome agreed to work together towards a better future, primarily focusing on economic advancement and political stability. In regard to the

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founding fathers, they seemed to be convinced about their European project. Later, in his memoirs, Jean Monnet, a chief architect of European unity, noted that “the essential thing [was] to hold fast to the few fixed principles that [had] guided us since the beginning: gradually to create among Europeans the broadest common interest, served by common democratic institutions.”²

From an academic viewpoint, the European project is often, quite rightly, viewed as a big work-in-progress, yet some question the very sustainability of the project. One author described it as “an animal in motion,” without “fixed” destination and “not something quite separate from and independent of the states that set it up.”³ While seeing the Community’s evolution as a puzzling business and “a strange creature, a kind of hybrid,” the author underlined: “The world of the Community is full of paradox and irony.”⁴

However, over a couple of decades the European project advanced to the extent that many peripheral countries, not directly involved in the union, wished to apply for membership of the European Community. At the same time, the Community was continuously faced with growing numbers of immigrants, from both and outside of Europe.⁵ The *gastarbeiters* (as the Germans called anyone coming to work in their country, including citizens of other EC Member States but, of course, who were subjected to different regulations) or the *extracomunitari* (as the Italians called anyone coming from outside of the EC), were allowed to come and reside in various EC states on a temporary basis, and many decided to remain permanently in their host country. This aspect became startlingly apparent during the 1973 oil crisis when many European governments offered to subsidize immigrants to return to their homelands, as there was no actual need for them. This policy was not successful and as illustrated by Milton Esman, the post-1973 development in France faced “very high rates of unemployment, approaching 50 percent, produced sentiments of resentment, isolation, and powerlessness” and resulted in “a street culture with the familiar accompaniment of drugs, violence-prone street gangs, petty crime, and hatred of mainstream French society.”⁶

Thus, in addition to addressing a new set of economic problems, the Europeans realized that the initial ambition to shape the Community based on ideas that are primarily congruent with Roman Catholicism (the founding fathers of the EC – Konrad Adenauer, Alcide de Gasperi and Robert Schuman – were all

² Jean Monnet, *Memoirs*, Collins, Glasgow, 1978, p. 522.

³ Richard McAllister, *From EC to EU*, Routledge, London, 1997, pp. 7–8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

⁵ See, for example, Branislav Radeljić, “Growing Concerns about Islam in the European Union,” *Review of International Affairs*, Vol. LXI, No. 1140, 2010, pp. 6–8.

⁶ Milton J. Esman, *Diasporas in the Contemporary World*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 27.

Christian Democrats and devoted Catholics) were likely to encounter serious obstacles.⁷ Aware of the circumstances, the Heads of State or Government of the nine Member States of the EC met at the Copenhagen European Summit in mid-December 1973 to discuss the ongoing challenges and to suggest solutions. In fact, it was at this meeting that the representatives decided to introduce the common concept of European identity into their foreign relations. Accordingly, this article elaborates on the ideas following the introduction of the concept and its accommodation both within official EU and academic discourses.

Origins

At the Copenhagen European Summit of 1973, the Representatives of the nine Member States of the European Community justified their decision to introduce the concept of European identity as a necessary step in order “to achieve a better definition of their relations with other countries and of their responsibilities and the place which they occupy in world affairs.”⁸ At that event, the Declaration on European Identity was released, consisting of three sections: The Unity of the Nine Member Countries of the Community, The European Identity in Relation to the World, and The Dynamic Nature of the Construction of a United Europe.⁹

The first section of the declaration briefly acknowledged the existence of selfish behavior that had undermined relations between European countries but, more importantly, stressed the capacity of the nine Member States of the Community to “overcome their past enmities” and therefore adopt the idea of unity as “a basic European necessity to ensure the survival of the civilization which they have in common.”¹⁰ Accordingly, the Nine agreed to preserve their national cultures, the principles of representative democracy, the rule of law, social justice and human rights, all perceived as fundamental elements of European identity. As the nine representatives noted:

“The diversity of cultures within the framework of a common European civilization, the attachment to common values and principles, the increasing

⁷ As some scholars put it, “the historical foundations of the European Union are undeniably Christian-Democratic, a capacious political tradition that accommodates temperate offshoots of conservative political Catholicism as well as a social Catholicism” (Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein, “The Politicization of European Identities,” in Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein (eds), *European Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 14).

⁸ European Communities, “The Copenhagen Summit Conference: Declaration on European Identity,” *Bulletin of the European Communities*, December 1973, No. 12, p. 118.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 118–122.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

convergence of attitudes to life, the awareness of having specific interests in common and the determination to take part in the construction of a United Europe, all give the European identity its originality and its own dynamism.”¹¹

The second section of the declaration served to assure the non-Member States that “European unification is not directed against anyone, nor it is inspired by a desire for power.”¹² The representatives stressed the relevance of close relations with the others: while relations with the Mediterranean, African countries, and the Middle East deserved greater cooperation “over the establishment of peace, stability and progress,” while the relations with the United States of America had to be preserved due to the “values and aspirations based on a common heritage.”¹³

Finally, the third section briefly explained how the Nine understood the future development of a European identity. According to them, it “will evolve as a function of the dynamic construction of a United Europe” and by becoming such a powerful tool, the Europeans “will strengthen their own cohesion and contribute to the framing of a genuinely European foreign policy.”¹⁴ Thus, European identity was imagined as a strong construct that would complement and sustain the economic and political aspects of European integration. However, from a contemporary perspective and with the benefit of hindsight, it would seem that the Nine were overambitious in their plans.

Although the three sections of the declaration tried to bring some rather contrasting points together, they did not offer any clear idea regarding how to achieve a common, supranational or European identity. For example, the nine representatives viewed a common European civilization as a sufficient ideal capable of dominating the existing diversity of national cultures within Europe, but still did not suggest any strategies. In addition, the Nine wrongly argued that European unification and consequent development of a European identity were not directed against the non-Member States, even though it had already become clear that being a European state outside the European Common Market was highly frustrating.¹⁵ Finally, what seems most surprising is that the Nine limited themselves and their ideas to the then participating members only, thereby excluding any thoughts about the future composition of the Community and how, if enlarged, European identity might develop differently.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 119.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 120.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁵ For example, for a detailed analysis of the EC’s discriminatory policies towards the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, see Branislav Radeljić, “Questionable Relationship: European Economic Community and Yugoslavia until 1968,” *Currents of History*, Issue 2010/1, pp.112–27.

Since 1973, the European Union has enlarged five times. So far, every single enlargement has suggested that the frontiers of Europe are shifting and that some states and regions that at one point in the past had been excluded from debates of European enlargement were granted EU membership status. For example, the discourse about the Other(s) in Europe was very present during the breakup of the Yugoslav federation. Some writings noted that the wars in Yugoslavia “shocked the civilized West”¹⁶ and encouraged an endless debate about the Balkans as a region:

“Today, the very word ‘Balkans’ conjures up images of intrigue, war, and human suffering on a scale abhorrent to Western society. To some people, the Balkan countries lack a clear Western orientation and carry far too much cultural baggage to belong in the European club. Western leaders refer to the region as the back door to Europe, the Balkan powder keg, or Europe’s doorstep. What these euphemisms hide is, perhaps, the wish that the Balkans were located anywhere other than in Europe.”¹⁷

Even though European policy-makers tried to address the wider European public and to justify their involvement in the Yugoslav crisis and consequent decisions to terminate the existence of the singular Balkan state, the public paid more attention to their national representatives, rather than their EU equivalents. In terms of the overall situation in Brussels in this period, *The Wall Street Journal* offered a rather damning indictment stating that: “All the talk about creating in the minds of citizens, a sense of loyalty and attachment to the EC is not worth much now, given that the new total structure will be as obscure as the Holy Roman Empire ... One may be called upon to die for the EC in war, but will not be able to say quite what one is dying for.”¹⁸ In fact, contrary to the enthusiasm of the Brussels elite, the 1992 Maastricht Treaty showed that the Europeans were not very convinced about the new Union and their position within it. Soledad García analyzed Eurobarometer surveys and concluded that a big majority of respondents in Member States prioritized their national identity over their EU identity: “One of the reasons why European Union identity is relatively weak, appears to be dissatisfaction of citizens concerning information from the Commission and their national government ... Equally discouraging has been the decreasing proportion of respondents who recognized benefits from European integration or who thought that membership is a good thing.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Sonia Lucarelli, *Europe and the Breakup of Yugoslavia*, Brill, Leiden, 2000, p. 1.

¹⁷ André Gerolymatos, *The Balkan Wars*, Spellmount, Staplehurst, 2004, p. 4.

¹⁸ “How to Cross the EC Pain Barrier,” *Wall Street Journal*, 4 March 1992.

¹⁹ Soledad García, “European Union Identity and Citizenship,” in Maurice Roche and Rik van Berkel (eds), *European Citizenship and Social Exclusion*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1997, p. 204.

Since the early 1990s the EU's position towards the previously mentioned European otherness has significantly changed as Slovenia, the ex-Yugoslav republic, Romania and Bulgaria, joined the Union in 2004 and 2007 respectively. These enlargements confirmed that Western Europe, once imagined as an unreachable region of the European landmass, was no longer at such a distance. The consequent Berlin Declaration (2007) marked the fiftieth anniversary of the signature of the Treaties of Rome and while proudly listing European successes of the previous decades, stressed the EU's ambition to preserve "the identities and diverse traditions of its Member States."²⁰ Nevertheless, the participants admitted that we, as Europeans, are facing "major challenges which do not stop at national borders" and used the term 'EU' as a response to these challenges, but referred to 'Europe' in order to mark a common future.²¹

However, is European identity strong and durable enough to address the above-mentioned challenges? In her analysis, Montserrat Guibernau correctly warns that nation-states sometimes "employ the EU as an excuse for action or inaction within the domestic arena and, sometimes they even refer to the EU as a scapegoat, thus fuelling nationalism and reinforcing national identity" – an approach that is even better explained if we take European identity as a "non-emotional identity, in contrast with the powerful and emotionally charged national identities of our time."²² In addition, as pointed out by some other writings, "[a] European identity ... cannot be based on any one language, as most national identities are. A European identity is also not based on any clear borders, a capital, or a pre-existing state with long-held symbols and institutions."²³

Challenges

Many Europeans cannot identify with Europe as a whole, but as French, German or Italian, or even prefer to limit themselves further, to a particular region of their own country. This tendency has become even more obvious after the 2004 enlargement of the European Union. In his study, Jürgen Habermas questions whether a European identity in such circumstances is necessary and whether transnational civic solidarity is even possible. In his view, the 2004

²⁰ European Union, "Declaration on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Signature of the Treaties of Rome," Internet: http://www.eu2007.de/en/About_the_EU/Constitutional_Treaty/BerlinerErklaerung.html, 10/5/2011.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Montserrat Guibernau, "Towards a European Identity?," in Andrew Gamble and David Lane (eds), *European Union and World Politics*, Palgrave, London, 2009, p. 284, 287.

²³ Richard Robyn, "Introduction," in Richard Robyn (ed), *The Changing Face of European Identity*, Routledge, Oxon, 2005, p. 8.

enlargement represented an immediate challenge for the Union, as it was obvious that “active political interventions will be necessary to bridge the gaps in socio-economic development between the old and new members.”²⁴ The discrepancies between the old, pre-2004 members, and new, post-2004 members “will aggravate conflicts over the distribution of the scarce resources of a comparatively small EU budget, conflicts between net contributors and net beneficiaries, core and periphery, old recipients in Southern and new recipients in Eastern Europe, small and large member states, and so forth.”²⁵

In order to minimize the existing concerns, Habermas perceived the European Union Constitution as an instrument which, while deepening integration, strengthening decision-making processes and reducing democratic deficit, could be “a vehicle for forming a European identity, if [the governments] accepted an admittedly risky and unavoidably time-consuming change in their accustomed way of doing business, and if they involved the citizens themselves in the process of shaping the constitution through referenda.”²⁶ As we witnessed, the involvement of the citizens resulted in the rejection of the constitution in France and the Netherlands, in May and June 2005, and led to the creation of the Treaty of Lisbon in December 2007. However, what appears more indicative is the fact that the Union will not manage to transform into a political community characterized by its own (European) identity due to the lack of a common language, tradition and history.²⁷

In regard to transnational civic solidarity, Habermas warns that it “cannot be produced *solely* through the strong negative duties of a universalistic morality of justice,” but through open national arenas in which “a self-propelling process of shared political opinion- and will-formation on European issues can develop above the national level.”²⁸ In this view, national differences – language, tradition and history – are of secondary relevance, whereas priority is given to the citizens of Europe, who while taking an active part in European affairs, will focus more on a common European benefit, rather than the national one. However, this involvement largely depends on the institutions of the EU that are responsible for providing space for the genuine citizen participation in public life. Here, Habermas insists on the relevance of building mutual trust and as he puts it, “increasing trust is not only a *result* but also a *presupposition* of a shared process of political opinion- and will-formation” and, therefore, “the path to a

²⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Divided West*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81.

democratic deepening of the Union and to the requisite mutual networking of national public spheres can only proceed via such an already accumulated capital of trust.”²⁹

With 2008 earmarked as the European year of intercultural dialogue, the European Parliament and the Council agreed that “a fundamental step is promoting the participation of each citizen, men and women on an equal footing, of each Member State and of European society as a whole in an intercultural dialogue, in particular through the structured cooperation with civil society. It contributes to creating a sense of European identity, by embracing differences and shaping the various aspects of belonging to a community.”³⁰ Later, the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue confirmed some of these notions and further clarified: “If there is a European identity to be realized, it will be based on shared fundamental values, respect for common heritage and cultural diversity as well as respect for the equal dignity of every individual.”³¹ In this way, intercultural dialogue was seen as a mechanism to manage “multiple cultural affiliations in a multicultural environment. It is a mechanism to constantly achieve a new identity balance, responding to new openings and experiences and adding new layers to identity without relinquishing one’s roots.”³²

Nonetheless, official documents and conclusions about the year of intercultural dialogue did not say much about European identity.³³ I identify three possible reasons for such omission. First, multicultural environment can hardly generate identity balance at the EU level. As already noted, the concept of European identity was introduced when the European officials realized that having an exclusively Christian democratic polity was not possible and that an unexpected influx of immigrants of non-European descent needed to be addressed. Some post-Maastricht debates concerning Muslim headscarves in

²⁹ Ibid., p. 81.

³⁰ Council, “Decision No. 1983/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 concerning the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008),” *Official Journal of the European Union*, 30 December 2006, L412, p. 45.

³¹ Council of Europe, “White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: Living together as equals in dignity, 2 May 2008,” Internet: <http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/White%20Paper%20final%20EN%20020508.pdf>, 10/5/2011.

³² Ibid.

³³ See, for example, Council, “Council Conclusions on the Promotion of Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue in the External Relations of the Union and its Member States, 20 November 2008,” Internet: http://www.interculturaldialogue2008.eu/fileadmin/downloads/documents/240-officialdocuments/081120_Council_Conclusions.pdf, 10/5/2011. In addition, see Council, “Notices from European Union institutions and bodies: Council conclusions of 22 May 2008 on Intercultural Competences,” *Official Journal of the European Union*, 7 June 2008, C141, pp. 14–16.

Europe have reconfirmed that culture is part of identity, capable of affecting identity balance.³⁴ This is where the main dilemma emerges: if the advocates of a European identity favour cultural diversity, then where are the problems with headscarves coming from? In his study, Anthony Smith sees culture as a relevant point of departure and notes that cultural identity is connected to national identity but, more importantly for our analysis here, underlines that a collective cultural identity incorporates three distinct features: a shared *continuity*, shared *memories* and a common *destiny*.³⁵ These features, taken individually or as a group, represent an ever-growing challenge within a substantially enlarged EU, thus being much more difficult to deal with today than it was in the 1970s or 1980s.

A second possible reason for largely overlooking the notion of European identity during the year of intercultural dialogue is concerned with the very nature of the European Union. Every new enlargement adds new layers to identity formation, thus further challenging and complicating work that is already in progress. The enlargements of 2004 and 2007 are particularly indicative of this trend: the EU welcomed some countries from Central and Eastern Europe, concurrently provoking a reemergence of well-versed debates about their backwardness.³⁶ Therein it is only Western Europe that is seen to be marked by fully democratic societies, while the rest of the continent is yet to go through transitions (or Westernization), often encouraging an exclusionary institutional approach. Smith's study lessens this gravity by believing in the European "family of cultures" and different involvement and contribution of its constituent parties: although "Europeans differ among themselves as much as from non-Europeans in respect of language..., territory..., law..., religion ... and economic and political system..., *as well as* in terms of ethnicity and culture," still "there *are* shared traditions, legal and political, and shared heritages, religious and cultural. Not all Europeans share in all of them... But at one time or another all Europe's communities have participated in at least *some* of these traditions and heritages, in some degree."³⁷

³⁴ On the headscarf issues, see Christian Joppke, *Veil*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2009; Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2007; Gritt Klinkhammer, "Recent Debates on the Headscarf in Europe and their Meaning for Religious Pluralism," in Michael Pye, Edith Franke, Alef Theria Wasim and Abdurrahman Ma'sud (eds), *Religious Harmony*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2006, pp. 279–288.

³⁵ Anthony D. Smith, "National Identity and the Idea of European Unity," *International Affairs*, Vol. 68, No. 1, 1992, p. 58.

³⁶ On the backwardness debate, see Andrew C. Janos, *East Central Europe in the Modern World*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2000; Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1994; Daniel Chirot (ed), *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1991.

³⁷ Anthony D. Smith, op. cit., p. 70.

Smith is right to argue that differences and efforts did manage to bring the parties together at some point in the past in order to enjoy mutual benefits of collaboration and peaceful coexistence. However, these ideas are still dominated by the term ‘shared’ and not ‘common’ and it is this missing transfer that provides space for further questions about the possibility of having a common European identity. In fact, while thinking about the nature of European integration, Smith himself insists that

“[i]t is important here to distinguish between families of culture and political or economic unions. The latter are usually deliberate creations; they are consciously willed unities, rationally constructed sets of institutions, the kind of frameworks that some European states are trying to hasten and others to delay. Families of culture, like a lingua franca, tend to come into being over long time-spans and are the product of particular historical circumstances, often unanticipated and unintentional. Such cultural realities are no less potent for being so often inchoate and uninstitutionalized. Thus the sentiments and identities that underpin the Islamic *umma* or community of Muslims are no less significant than any official Islamic social and political institutions.”³⁸

Achieving a common European identity is much more complicated than creating a political or economic union. Apart from requiring more time and effort, the responsibility for a common identity lies in the hands of the EU citizens, thus it is the French, the Swedes, the Bulgarians and many more who are expected to ignore or at least put on hold their national identity for the sake of a common European one. At the same time, this process would be even more problematic for European large non-Christian minorities many of whom have struggled with policies of acculturation, assimilation and integration within the host society. Often, these minorities prefer to continue cultivating their own, imported identity and therefore would have to go through two phases of identity formation, first one focused on the acceptance of national identity of the host country and second one focused on the switch from a new national to supranational, i.e. European identity. The success of such a process is highly questionable as, for example, the importance of Islam in Muslim communities in Europe seems to be on the rise. According to one study, “[i]n France, 85 percent of Muslim students describe their religious beliefs as ‘very important,’ versus 35 percent of non-Muslims. In Germany, too, religiosity is more widespread among Muslim immigrants than among natives — 81 percent of Turks come from a religious background, versus 23 percent of Germans.”³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., p. 71.

³⁹ Christopher Caldwell, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, Penguin Books, London, 2009, p. 143.

A final possible reason why the year of intercultural dialogue did not come with any serious discussions of European identity has to do with solidarity and tolerance. I agree with William Sweet's separation of the two terms: while tolerance "suggests the existence of important differences among individuals (as in the notion of religious tolerance)," solidarity "implies that what differences exist among the individuals concerned are not important — that there is a recognition of common interests, and a willingness to engage in actions with others, even if it involves sacrifices on our part."⁴⁰

However, answering two questions — 'How far should tolerance go?' and 'Is solidarity possible?' — is not an easy task. In regard to the former, the present European Union obviously struggles with the tolerance. For example, apart from seeing the *burqa* as a symbol for "the repression that women can suffer in Islam" and a threat to "security, sexual equality and secularism," some European governments would like to see it banned although "banning it altogether would be an infringement on the individual rights which their culture normally struggles to protect."⁴¹ Such an approach shows that these governments are ready to express intolerance towards their Muslim minorities. In regard to the question of solidarity, without a good record of tolerance, it is impossible to achieve solidarity on a large scale and across the different barriers that characterize the enlarged EU.

Following the 2004 enlargement of the European Union, the Brussels officials optimistically noted that:

"[i]f the countries are to grow together into a viable political union, the people of Europe must be prepared for a European solidarity. This solidarity must be stronger than the universal solidarity ... European solidarity — the readiness to open one's wallet and to commit one's life to others because they, too, are Europeans — is not something that can be imposed from above. It must be more than institutional solidarity. It must be felt by Europeans as individuals."⁴²

This sound statement suggests that the concept of European solidarity rests heavily on the willingness of the citizens of Europe. Contrary to intolerance that is often caused by the official decisions, thus from above, solidarity is expected to develop and strengthen as a grass root phenomenon. This discrepancy is due to the

⁴⁰ William Sweet, "Solidarity and Human Rights," in William Sweet (ed), *Philosophical Theory and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, ON, 2003, p. 216.

⁴¹ "A Bad Idea", *The Economist*, 15 May 2010, p. 18.

⁴² Kurt Biedenkopf, Bronislaw Geremek and Krzysztof Michalski, "The Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe: Concluding Remarks," Internet: <http://cordis.europa.eu/documents/documentlibrary/104214451EN6.pdf>, 30/5/2011.

fact that notions of (in)tolerance are primarily relevant for discourses about the relations between 'original' Europeans and European otherness, whereas solidarity is mainly embodied in discourses about cooperation among the original Europeans only. Still, even this kind of solidarity can be questioned by looking at how, for example, Italians perceive a growing influx of Romanian nationals.⁴³

Thus, the path towards a European identity faces various obstacles from the very beginning. Talks about tolerance, the first link in the chain, are often dominated by discussions of different acts of intolerance that further complicate the viability of European solidarity. This solidarity, as correctly warned by Tzvetan Todorov, is a true prerequisite for the European identity project. However, in his assessment of the present situation across the enlarged EU, Todorov notes that "[n]obody wants to die so that customs barriers can be lowered, and nobody willingly parts with some of her income if she doesn't feel she has anything in common with those who will benefit from her contribution. Now the European peoples do not have the impression that they have a common democratic life; so everyone simply looks after herself."⁴⁴ These words do not strengthen the concept of European solidarity, but rather point out its limitations. As he goes on to suggest, "solidarity cannot come into being without the people feeling a sense of solidarity for each other, and this feeling comes in turn from democratic participation, from the common choice of a destiny."⁴⁵

Prospects

Without knowing whether there will be any significant progress in generating tolerance and solidarity across the European Union, discussions about European identity and European citizenship are highly speculative. Although in 2004 EU representatives seemed confident when saying that "Europe's identity is something that must be negotiated by its peoples and institutions..., so that European values, traditions, and conceptions of life can live on and be effective,"⁴⁶ they have not managed to bring the two sides closer together. Accordingly, I identify some of the dominant dilemmas that further

⁴³ See, for example, "Immigrant crime poisons Italy-Romania relations," Internet: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/immigrant-crime-poisons-italy-romania-relations/article-179703>, 30/5/2011; "EU: Italy targets Romanian immigrants with plan to suspend Schengen," Internet <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,RFERL,,ITA,,482a97a31,0.html>, 30/5/2011; Tom Kington, "Italy tells Romania: We don't want your Roma," *The Guardian*, 26 June 2007.

⁴⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2010, p. 186.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Kurt Biedenkopf *et al.*, *op. cit.*

question the ideal of European identity.

First, the relevance of national identity is still very strong across the European Union and it is difficult to predict the extent to which the postmodernist understanding of the nation-state and national identity will manage to become the dominant perspective.⁴⁷ Apart from existing EU Member States and their national pride, identity issues of prospective members deserve attention, as well. For example, the break-up of Yugoslavia represented an opportunity for the newly established states to foster and promote their own identity that was suppressed before the state crisis and consequent wars. Thus, Croatia and Kosovo, to name just two, could find it difficult to understand the value of ‘replacing’ their own identities with a European identity, even if it could benefit both of them.

Second, future enlargements are likely to accentuate questions of tolerance and solidarity, thus negatively affecting the construction of European identity. If Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo become members of the EU, its Muslim population will amount to over 100 million. But are the Brussels decision-makers ready to face a more obvious presence of Islam in the EU? According to one scholar, “the accession of Muslim countries and the rise of far-right mobilization and violence, can only be addressed effectively under a broad consensus among its members. Across Europe, however, the citizens are split regarding its cultural identity and social model.”⁴⁸ This split is accentuated still further by the fact that immigration and the Islamization of immigrants in the EU is regulated by the individual Member States, not the Union. Indeed, extreme differences between Germany and the Netherlands in relation to the legal status of Islam represent an additional challenge to the idea of European identity.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ As Fariba Salehi summarized it: “The most powerful modern institution that homogenizes and standardizes identity is the nation-state. The nation-state is a gigantic culture industry. A postmodern critique of the nation-state offers a radically different reading of the nation-state, by describing it as an apparatus of power that produces mega-narratives of identity in the name of ‘people.’ A postmodern theory of the nation-state deconstructs the nationalistic amount of the nation-state, and anchors the question of ‘national’ identity in the locus of the ‘other,’ and in so doing erases its totalizing boundaries, challenges the political and ideological manoeuvres that assume an essentialist core in the imagined communities, and argues for the hybridity and ambivalence of national identity” (Fariba Salehi, “A Postmodern Conception of the Nation State,” in Athena S. Leoussi (ed), *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, Transaction, London, 2001, p. 252).

⁴⁸ Juan Díez Medrano, “The Public Sphere and the European Union’s Political Identity,” in Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein (eds), *European Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 106.

⁴⁹ In Germany, the state and religious institutions are not separated; while the Jewish community, the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church are all recognized by the state, Islam is not. In the Netherlands, the state and religious institutions are separated; the Dutch system allows all religions to establish their own institutions, including Islam.

Third, as alluded to in the previous dilemma, the fact that the European Union does not speak with a single voice is an added difficulty. In his 1997 study, García understood this trend as a result of different economic and political interests that were not sufficiently explained to the citizens: “This is due to the fact that there is considerable ambiguity in national governments’ agendas attached to Economic and Monetary Union which shows them unwilling to appear responsible for the hard choices that need to be made.”⁵⁰ More importantly, as García rightly predicted, the 2004 enlargement increased the “elite ambiguity, since there seem to be many antagonistic groups in the societies of these countries with often incompatible goals, which extends to their incipient civil societies.”⁵¹ Given the present circumstances, the increasing national and regional differentiations are likely to continue and further question the success of a supranational, European identity.

Finally, while recognizing both inter-governmental and supranational approaches to policy-making, European Union representatives recognize their own reservations in regard to future integration of the Union, in general. It is this flexibility that can determine the nature of European identity: while the first approach indicates that the national governments have little interest in deepening “integration by shifting power from their own national to the federal level as long as the status quo seems to be secure,” the second approach suggests that “as soon as the alternative to the status quo is the end of the integration and as soon as it is not about the failure of a specific policy or a specific treaty but about the EU’s very existence, even decisions to abandon one more aspect of the cherished national sovereignty might be acceptable as the lesser evil.”⁵²

Conclusion

In his remarkable account, Jacques Delors, former President of the European Commission, defined a united Europe as a “grouping that is unique in the density and quantity of its commercial exchanges, a comparative oasis of monetary order and even of financial equilibrium, and a considerable reserve of internal growth. It possesses a demographic, historical and cultural wealth, homogenous even in its extreme diversity, which, doubtless, no other region of the world can claim.”⁵³ Apart from acknowledging the dominance of economic dimension in the process of European integration, this definition indicated the

⁵⁰ Soledad García, op. cit., pp. 205–206.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 206.

⁵² Anton Pelinka, “The European Union as an Alternative to the Nation-State,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 24, No. 1–2, 2011, p. 27.

⁵³ Jacques Delors, *Our Europe*, Verso, London, 1992, p. 17.

existence of strong ties that link all Europeans and dominate existing diversities. Accordingly, the idea of 'United in diversity' became the official motto of the EU, in the year 2000.

In contrast with the official optimistic pronouncements and further wishes, academic scholarship continues to question the entire notion of European unity and of a common European identity. While some of the available opinions have continued to believe that "[a]ny attempt to reduce contemporary Europe to a single idea is bound to fail" noting that "Europeans differ about almost everything imaginable,"⁵⁴ others have decided to give European identity a chance to flourish: "In reality, identity resides not in diversity itself, but in the status accorded to it. In this way, a purely negative and relative trait is transformed into an absolute positive quality; difference becomes identity, and plurality unity ... In this sense, European unity can be assumed by the European Union and contribute to the reinforcement of its project."⁵⁵ In my view, this invitation is extended to both the Brussels elite and European citizens, but will they manage to speak with a single voice?

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⁵⁴ Richard Rose, *What Is Europe?*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1996, p. 2.

⁵⁵ Tzvetan Todorov, op. cit., p. 180.

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The EU's Historical Narrative and Enlargement to Eastern Europe

ABSTRACT

The European Parliament's quest to provide a legitimising discourse for European Union enlargement led it to develop a compelling historical narrative to justify the entry of eight Central and Eastern European countries in 2004. This narrative was however built through the lens of Western European elaborations of historical myths and memory. Central and Eastern European representatives did not in fact share this historical identity, and use of the historical narrative fell by the wayside in debates of Romania's and Bulgaria's accession between 2004 and 2007.

Key words: European Parliament, identity, memory, myths, narratives, enlargement.

Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) is a key actor in the construction of an identity for the European Union (EU). As the only directly elected institution within the EU's structure, and the largest conglomerate of politicians within the European arena, it has ever since its inception strived to give voice and shape to ideas about Europe, the nature and goals of the process of European integration, and the identity and values on which this process is based. This quest for the construction of a European identity was especially evident in the EP's debates of subsequent enlargement rounds, when the need to justify the entry of new members into the European 'club' also provided a unique opportunity to actually define and refine the criteria for entering the club — not just in terms

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of the actual, practical criteria imposed by the EU as a whole, but also in terms of the ideational foundations of the project.

Over four decades of enlargement debates, the EP developed a strong identity discourse based on political, historical and cultural elements.² The debates on the enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, which were held regularly between 1999 and 2004 as part of the EP's increased involvement in the enlargement process, were characterised above all by the construction of a strong historical narrative to strengthen the legitimacy of eight new countries that had, until barely a decade before, been on the opposite political and economic side of the Iron Curtain. They provided an opportunity for the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to reflect upon and articulate their ideas about 'Europe' and about its historical identity, and were in this sense much more about the existing (largely Western) members of the EU and their shared project rather than about Central and Eastern Europe per se. The constructed historical narrative was therefore a Western European narrative — and the extent to which it actually resonated with Central and Eastern Europeans, and if they would actually subscribe to it during or after the enlargement process, is a question that will also be addressed towards the end of this piece.

On Historical Narratives and Collective Identities

The European Parliament's enlargement debates in the post-Cold War period gave prominence to new themes alongside that of political identity. The debates on the fifth enlargement, in particular, were characterised by the presence of a strong historical narrative that flanked the existing political features of the European identity constructed by MEPs in the previous three decades. In articulating this historical narrative and inserting it alongside political values in their legitimisation of the accession of ten new countries between 1997 and 2004, MEPs attempted to go beyond a purely political identity in their construction of 'Europe': this article explores the contents of this narrative, its use in parliamentary discourse, and its limits within the wider enlargement debate.

It is widely accepted in social identity theory that history, or rather shared historical narratives, constitute a fundamental element in the construction and re-construction of collective identities. The past is often mobilised in order to justify or legitimise the present, and it is interpreted and understood in function of contemporary concerns and needs. This interpretation and re-interpretation of

² For a discussion of the EP's enlargement discourse and identity construction with regards to Eastern Europe, see Emma De Angelis, "The European Parliament's identity discourse and Eastern Europe, 1974–2004," *Journal of European Integration History*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2011, pp. 103–116.

the past constructs ‘myths’ that give meaning to the present and provide a shared framework for political debate.³

Myths can be defined as “a special kind of story about the past that symbolises the values of a group and legitimates their claims” — as for instance does Peter Burke in his work on European memory.⁴ Such myths are largely produced by political and cultural elites and are based on the construction of historical narratives that are then used as a frame of reference for political debate. They provide a source of political legitimacy, not necessarily based on historical continuity, but also, potentially, a legitimacy founded on a “sharp break with the past due to traumatic experiences or policy failures.”⁵ In this sense, historical events (or a specific selection of historical events) are interpreted and constructed into a historical narrative that shapes collective memory. History, memory and identity are thus inexorably interconnected to the extent that the meaning constructed through a historical narrative provides political legitimacy and cohesion to a community.⁶ Historians have a long tradition of looking at the role of myths and collective memory in the foundations of national identities. For instance, George Mosse analysed the creation of the “Myth of the War Experience” in post-WWI Europe, and Germany in particular, as the attribution of meaning to a hitherto meaningless experience by taking it through a process of memorialisation, institutionalisation, and even trivialisation that transforms a recent historical experience into a key element of political culture.⁷ Henry Rousso’s analysis of the way the French have remembered, or removed, their Vichy past, provides a further example of how history and memory have played out in a selective form of remembering a troubling past through different phases of French public life.⁸ The role of history in the construction of collective identities is therefore well documented, and it may not come as much of a surprise

³ Bo Stråth, “Introduction: Myth, Memory and History in the Construction of Community,” in Bo Stråth (ed), *Myth and Memory in the Construction of Community: Historical Patterns in Europe and Beyond*, PIE-Peter Lang, Brussels, 2000, pp. 19–46. See also Jürgen Straub (ed), *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness*, Berghan Books, New York, 2005.

⁴ Peter Burke, “Foundation Myths and Collective Identities in Early Modern Europe,” in Bo Stråth, *Europe and the Other and Europe as Other*, PIE-Peter Lang, Brussels, 2001, pp. 113–122.

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