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The European Identity: An Attempt at a Novel Approach

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The 2019 European elections drew huge attention for many reasons. On the one hand, over 50 percent of the eligible voters cast their votes. This rendered these turnout rates the highest since the 1994 elections, alongside marking the first time increase in the voter turnout rates since the first direct elections to the European Parliament (EP) in 1979 (European Parliament, 2019). Seeing this rise in the turnout rates, many senior officials of the European Union (EU) even prematurely welcomed it as a boost to the legitimacy of the Union (Euronews, 2019). On the other hand, the final election results revealed that in response to the heavy losses suffered by the mainstream centre-right and centre-left groups in the EP, the right-wing nationalist and populist groups made the biggest gains (BBC, 2019). Since then, this unexpected surge of the Eurosceptic and anti-European forces in the 2019 European elections has provoked new debates on the legitimacy and the future of the Union. In such a political climate, it thus seems more than necessary to readdress the European (Union) Identity, a construct which has a solid link with European integration due to developing within its confines.

Based on these points, the main argument of this article is that the European Identity is caught amid five primary tensions, between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism; civic and cultural forms of Europeanism; the past and the future of the integration; the goals of maintaining the integration and appealing to the citizens; and quantitative versus qualitative Europeanism. Therefore, alongside examining the repercussions of each tension, this article will simultaneously attempt to present an alternative outlook to the European Identity, through defying its limited room of manoeuvre left by those tensions.

Approaching the European Identity from a Novel Perspective

Standing as a variable whose meaning keeps changing in response to changing circumstances (Delanty, 2014), the European Identity ought to be reassessed in the face of new challenges. That is why, this section concerns itself with offering an alternative approach to the European Identity by going beyond five key tensions that will be discussed.

Intergovernmentalism vs. Supranationalism

It is a well-known fact that the contention between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism became decisive over the trajectory of European integration for decades. In turn, this conflict inevitably influenced the course of the European Identity. With the surge of particularly identity-based Euroscepticism, this dichotomy put the national and European identities in an ongoing battle of existence. In simple terms, this logic suggests that the European Identity, alongside the rising competences of the EU, grows in power at the expense of the national allegiances, leading some citizens to view it as a threat to national identity and autonomy (Fligstein, 2014).

However, it is likely that the national identity and the European Identity can coexist for many reasons. First, on the level of personal identities, it is rarely the case that a person has only one identity. Likewise, a European citizen can claim multiple identities, including European, national, local, religious, ethnic, gender or group-based ones at once (Baltes, 2014). That is, ‘as with many identities, a European identity may coexist alongside other identities since individuals generally have more than one identity’ (Delanty, n.d., 4).

Second, their evolving and constantly shifting nature contributes to the overlapping of identities. ‘Ideas of belonging

are overlapping, inclusive and exclusive in complex and contradictory patterns, so it would be far too simple to put a European identity against national ones' (Sträth, 2002, 391).

Third, identities are in an ongoing interaction among each other. In particular, during this age of mass communication, it is not reasonable to expect that different forms of national identity and the European Identity are proceeding in their isolated paths without any contact.

Finally, there are some narratives that alternatively frame the national and European identities in a mutually supportive manner. To illustrate, many commentaries have underlined 'the European rescue of the nation-state' (Milward, 2000) in the sudden wake of the Second World War, as well as the 'Europeanization of national identities' (Delanty, n.d., 5), as seen in the post-war reconstruction of the West German national identity (Paterson, 2010; Wittlinger, 2010), along with Spain, Portugal, and Greece in the post-dictatorship periods respectively.

All the foregoing manifests that the portrayal of national and European identities on opposite edges is again of discursive construction. Thus, it may equally be possible to reconsider them in a positive light, which sees the European Identity stand for 'complementing, enhancing and enriching one's national identity' (Shehaj, 2015). Put differently, the national identity and European identity do not have to exclude one another. As the European identity does not currently displace, but exists alongside, the national identities for a significant share of the EU citizens (Fligstein, 2014; Shehaj, 2015), it does not necessarily force people to choose between their nation and Europe. Therefore, the primary requisite to resolving the ongoing conflict between national alignments and the European Identity may be to stop presuming such a rivalry between these two, alongside giving more chance to their 'peaceful coexistence'.

Cultural vs. Civic Europeanism

The persistent tension between cultural and civic forms of Europeanism inevitably opens into discussion the culturalist methods adopted by the European institutions, not least the Commission, as to their relevance and efficacy in forging the European Identity. Do we really have to 'find out what Europe has in common, historically and culturally, in order to define, articulate and strengthen the European Identity?' (Schneider, 1999, 13).

Those policies of European elites motivated by providing a culturalist core to the European Identity are indeed highly problematic due to many reasons. First, contrary to widespread assumptions, European history is not that 'commonly shared'. At the very least, in the great European wars, 'common history has been experienced by many as against, not with, each other' (Karlsson, 1999, 66). In reference to Europe as a distinctive cultural entity, a set of European values are mentioned. Yet, that even their definition varies from one narrative to another reveals the lack of consensus over what these so-called European values are.

Alternatively, it is likely as well to reframe European history, particularly based on its negative features. As suggested by many accounts before (Karlsson, 1999; Havel, 2000), Europe may come to mean not only peace, democracy, human rights and tolerance but also religious persecution, ethnic hatred, fascist dictatorship and Holocaust. Likewise, Castells (2002, 234) suggests that since Europeans spent particularly the last century 'killing each other', the notion of a shared history may even have a 'sinister connotation' for many. Hence, the initiatives informed by settling the European Identity on such contentious terms as European history or values do not seem promising – notwithstanding many potential problems and divisions that those may trigger.

This brings into the fore the need to readdress the culturalist essence of the Union's identity- related policies, or 'the ideology that may be summed up from Plato to NATO' (Delanty, 1995, 16). In doing this, two options are available. The first one is to resettle the European Identity on a civic ground. Instead of depending on public relations efforts, information campaigns, advertisements for promoting speculative common symbols (Risse, 2003; Duchesne, 2008), the European Identity may centre on the legal dimension of the European citizenship. This not only means displacing the hitherto preoccupation with image politics, with a new tendency focused on the substance of the Identity itself. This may also present a new background to the European Identity without any reference to the 'otherization', as happens with cultural Europeanism (Fligstein, 2014). Ridding the European Identity of its problematic cultural

references may serve to avoid potential frictions likely to arise due to cultural differences.

The second option may be to expose the European Identity much more to the interaction between related parties. Bearing in mind that the European Identity may exist on different levels, a 'dialogic view' may be brought, in compliance with Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy (Delanty, 2003). Or, it may be portrayed as a 'project identity' (Castells, 2002, 4), instead of having to rely on the double-edged nature of Europe as a 'contradictory civilisation' (Havel, 2000). This alternative constellation may bring the citizens and the related parties into the realm of the European Identity, alongside challenging, maybe even changing, the elite-led top-down style.

Past vs. Future of European Integration

Closely related to the previous tension is the contention between the past and the future of the integration. Getting obsessed with past failures and defeats apparently prevents proceeding on the path of integration smoothly. In what follows, this may cause confusions on the future of the European Identity, possibly portrayed as full of uncertainties.

However, there are two ways to avoid this intangible challenge. First, the past is not necessarily the primary point of reference for the European Identity. Would the European Identity 'flourish only by looking at the past, at our common history?'. Or, 'would it not be equally important to recall what Europe means today and will mean in the future?' (Schneider, 1999, 14). That's why, as identities cannot solely be backward-looking narratives but must also entail a look to the future (Delanty, n.d., 9), the European Identity may become much more future-oriented in setting new realistic goals ahead. This may help overcome the current deadlock occurring due to the persistent references made to the speculative common European values and so-called 'shared' historical memories. Through this way, the European Identity may proceed on its path on more realistic terms, depending instead on the commonly shared future of the European citizens.

Second, it is likely to view the European Identity as a positive-sum game. Instead of looking to the past failures of the integration, an optimistic stance that highlights the past successes of the integration may prevail. This is not to suggest that the problems or challenges encountered along the road of integration, then and now, shall be neglected altogether. However, whilst keeping a cautious eye over them, it is equally possible to further the European Identity based on the earlier achievements of the integration project, such as the peaceful coexistence of the European nations. This may not only prevent the overshadowing of the future of the European Identity by the past negativities. It may also contribute to reaching a general compromise among the European citizens based on their common gains and interests around the European Identity (Held, 2014; Schnittger, 2007).

European Integration vs. European Citizens

Then comes the well-known ambivalence as to the main purpose(s) underlying the European Identity. Why do we need the European Identity in the first place? Is it to guarantee the maintenance of the integration and the Union or to prioritise the citizens? Though many prominent actors keep referring to 'people's Europe' as their ultimate goal, it is still ambiguous whether the Union or citizens ultimately matter concerning the European Identity. This means that even whilst attempting to ensure the legitimacy of the integration via the European Identity, the Europe-makers give the impression that they value not the citizens, but the longevity and robustness of the Union.

What is urgently required, thus, is to readdress the aims, along with the applied methods and mechanisms, for building up the European Identity. If it is to mainly stand for 'ordinary people' (Vignon, 1999, 111), without being degraded merely to the political culture of the EU (Delanty, 2003), then the representativeness, responsiveness, and inclusiveness of the European Identity vis-à-vis citizens need to be ensured. This, before everything, involves displacing the elite-driven process of 'creating the European Identity from above or through central directives from Brussels' (Karlsson, 1999, 66-70), with rising involvement of citizens based on their common interests. As the top-down approach will evolve into the bottom-up one, this may reduce the criticisms directed towards the European Identity as to neglecting the ordinary people, as well as turning the objective of people's Europe into a concrete reality.

Quantitative vs. Qualitative Europeanism

Regarding the last tension, it is highly relevant to question and revise the methods used when measuring the European Identity. At first glance, it may merely seem as a question of measurement. However, given that the Eurobarometer surveys are seen as the main means of manifesting the existence, or lack thereof, of 'Europeans', this indeed corresponds to a clash between quantitative and qualitative currents of Europeanism.

It is undeniable that the Eurobarometer, since its creation in 1974, has turned out to be the main instrument of reflecting, and somehow influencing, the degrees of Europeanness. Nevertheless, there stands an evident confusion as to 'gauging the identity or consciousness' on the part of the respondents (Delanty, n.d., 4). This may lead to some suspicions over the capacity of the Eurobarometer surveys to fully discern the presence of the European Identity.

In a sense, even if the surveys are trying to measure the Europeanness on a differentiated basis, those may again fail to comprehend the complex nature of the European Identity in its entirety. For instance, stemming from this complexity itself, an exact portion of people may identify with the political or economic dimensions of the European Identity, though it may not be the case for the cultural side, or vice versa.

Moreover, in this age of challenges, all the parties believing in the salience of the European Identity ought to ask themselves these two critical questions: Is it still relevant to only 'look for quantitative evidence in terms of the number of citizens who claim to have a European Identity?' (Delanty, n.d., 5). Or, is there something much deeper to enquire as to thoroughly grasping the mechanisms and linkages lying beneath the European Identity? Thus, an alternative approach may consist of avoiding one-dimensional assessments in measuring the European Identity, giving more primacy to its qualitative and multifaceted dimensions and developing various measurement mechanisms taking account of such complexities.

All in all, engaging in the European Identity from a novel standpoint would re-establish it on the recognition of a variety of differences among Europeans, rather than imposing from above a so-called 'commonly shared' European Identity.

Conclusion

Depending upon the foregoing points, the article contends that the European Identity is caught amid five major tensions, so a novel approach can be developed on the mere condition that its limited room of manoeuvre left by those tensions is overcome. Thus, this article suggests an overall alternative outlook to the European Identity, pointing to some ways out of those tensions.

In response to the friction between the national identity and the European Identity, I suggest going beyond the presumption of competition between these two, alongside giving more credit to their peaceful coexistence. Regarding the conflict between civic and cultural forms of Europeanism, I offer two options, one to do with resettling the European Identity on a civic ground and the other about granting it a much more communicative basis. On the tension between the past and the future of the integration, I suggest adopting a future-oriented and optimistic stance, taking strength from the past achievements of the integration. In resolving the clash between the aims of privileging the integration and appealing to the citizens, I point to the rising involvement of citizens and related parties, upon defying the elite-driven, top-down approach of identity-building. In terms of the final tension between qualitative and quantitative notions of Europeanism, I offer to avoid merely quantity-based, one-dimensional assessments when measuring the European Identity, in favour of a more sophisticated mechanism.

Last but not least, the European Identity is at a crossroads again, in the face of many challenges. The worst scenario is that it may run into new problems in the period to come. However, whatever problems are faced, it is plausible to adopt a flexible approach towards the European Identity, as flexibility is in its nature. Main premises of such an approach may include a genuine 'unity in diversity', rather than 'contradiction over unity' or 'unity over contradiction' (Jansen, 1999, 117), orienting around the future, not the past, and finally the trio of representativeness-responsiveness-inclusiveness.

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