

European Identity: Does Europe Exist?



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Abstract

A European identity is an important factor for the integration of Europe because it implies that individuals and nations within Europe will subordinate parochial interests to achieve a common good based on the beliefs, values, and norms embodied by the identity. A European identity is composed of variables related to political and cultural identity. At the same time a European identity can theoretically exist simultaneously with other national or cultural identities, with individuals establish a hierarchy of importance or relevance for their identities to their lives. The analysis primarily used the data from the most recent Eurobarometer survey to conduct an analysis of the political and cultural variables related to European identity. Based on the analysis, a European identity exists that depends on cultural variables related to political culture, common heritage, and common traditions. The analysis also suggests that a European identity remains subordinate to national identity in situations in which the two identities are in conflict, which may create a barrier for integration in the European Union.

Keywords: Eurobarometer, European Identity, Cultural dimension, Political cultural, Geography location.

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Introduction

The development of a European identity in which individuals residing in Europe consider the European Union (EU) as identical to their political, social, cultural, and economic norms and values is critical for the long-term integration of the EU. The concept of European identity has multiple meanings depending on the specific type of discourse in which it is discussed. In general, the concept refers to the sense of personal identification with Europe and with the EU as the institutional embodiment of European norms, values and beliefs (Gvozden, p. 9). The concept of European identity raises two fundamental issues relevant to the EU integration process. The first issue involves the existence of a European identity that transcends the identity of individuals based on more local factors such as national identity or culture group identity. The second issue considers the effect, if any, of European integration for strengthening the development of a European identity.

Identity is a construct often used in social and political discourse that is borrowed from psychology and refers to the way in which individuals define themselves as separate and distinct based on their beliefs, behaviours, and attitudes (Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel, p. 154). Many factors influence the formation of identity including cultural norms, social values, and political institutions. Identity is often the basis for individuals classifying themselves as a member of a group based on the perceived similarity in beliefs, behaviours, and attitudes. It is also a basis for classifying others as members of separate and disparate groups based on differences in beliefs, behaviours, and attitudes (Bruter, p. 1156). Based on this perspective, a European identity is the set of beliefs, values, and norms that foster self-identification as European. At the same time, individuals can identify with several groups that reflect their beliefs, values, and norms as long as the identification with one group does not preclude identification with another group. As a result, an individual can simultaneously have a European identity and a Swedish, German or French identity provided that the beliefs, values, and norms associated with the different identities are not in conflict (Risse, p. 294).

Many of the EU policies and its long-range planning are based on the premise that a European identity exists, and that an interaction exists between the European identity

and the processes related to EU integration. The EU considers the existence of a European identity as a prerequisite for the development of EU democracy because the EU primarily considers itself a political community requiring citizenship from the individuals in the community (Scheuer and Schmitt, 507). At the same time, there is substantial evidence that many individuals in the EU are not willing to subordinate their national identity and the national interests reflected by the national identity to a larger European identity as defined by the EU and its policies (Strath, p. 391). While a European identity may exist, it appears to overlap with national identity and in some cases local cultural identity. These identities are not mutually exclusive, with an individual capable of having a strong European identity, a strong national identity, and a strong sub-national community identity (Hooghe and Marks, p. 129). Nonetheless, the overlapping nature of these national and European identities may create the need to prioritise the importance of the respective identities based on relative strength when they represent conflicting political or social interests.

A particular difficulty with the assessment of European identity is the variation that exists among the nations in Europe and within the nations. The citizens of some nations, particularly in Western Europe, have a stronger belief in a European identity than the citizens of other member nations. Within nations, the concept of European identity is often divided among gender, age, and social class (Strath, p. 391). To examine whether a European identity exists, it is initially necessary to determine the constituent elements or variables that compose a European identity. These elements are the factors that individuals may consider when self-identifying as European. The elements may also contribute to the degree of European identity and the priority given to European interests that conflict with national interests.

Constituent Elements of a European Identity

According to Strath (p. 388), the concept of a European identity is fluid and has different meaning depending on the particular type of discourse and the underlying agenda for promoting the concept of European unity. Some of the approaches to defining European identity have considered it to be related to a concrete set of factors that define the greater political and economic structure of the European Union (EU), such as court rulings generated at the supranational level or common economic policies. This

perspective of European identity examines only the institutions of the EU and does not examine the way in which individuals relate to and accept these institutions. Another approach to defining European identity is normative and suggests that it is related to the common concepts concerning the values that all Europeans share, which creates a commonality transcending historical political identities to nation states or cultural groups within nation states. European identity has also been defined substantively in terms of the common elements of the norms, values, and behaviours shared by all Europeans. European identity has also been defined in political terms based on the degree of identification or even allegiance that individuals owe to the state political unit when compared to the larger political unit of the EU (Cerutti, p .4).

The concept of a European identity emerged from the Copenhagen summit of the members of the EC that took place in 1973, which issued the Declaration of European Identity. The Declaration initially had political and economic elements in the definition of European identity, focusing on the need for the nine EC states to develop a unified economic policy towards the nations of the Middle East, the United States, the Soviet Union and the other states in Europe not members of the EC (Strath, 389). The underlying assumption in the declaration was that common cultural factors and political interests were the foundations of a common identity that could eventually transcend national identity. The Declaration served to identify the variables or political identity, economic identity, and cultural identity that would be part of the discourse about European identity over the next several decades, but appears to have approached European identity as a defined set of institutional factors.

A model of European identity postulated by Bruter (p. 1153) suggests that it is composed primarily of civic factors and cultural factors. The civic factors refer to the degree of identification with the political institutions defining the laws, rules and rights that have an effect on their daily lives. The cultural factors refer to the sense that individuals from other European nations are closer to them in terms of shared values, norms, and beliefs than individuals from non-European nations. The political and cultural factors operate independently to influence European identity. In effect, an individual can have a European identity based on the perception of shared culture but nonetheless reject the EU as a political institution representative of a European identity. The degree of

European identity is also influenced by information individuals obtain about the nature of similarities with other Europeans or the legitimacy of the political unit claiming to be a manifestation of European identity. In this general framework, the two primary elements or variables affecting European identity are civic or political and cultural. Economic considerations can be subsumed in the political element because many political decisions have economic consequences. The cultural element can include social factors such as class or age as well as religious and ideological considerations.

The various discussions of a European identity have often framed it in political terms, with identity viewed as allegiance to the greater political unit of the European Union rather than to the political unit of the member states. This perspective of the importance of a European identity for EU integration was an implicit outcome of the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 that transformed the EC from an intergovernmental organisation into the EU operating as a supranational entity (Scheuer and Schmitt, 2008). The discourse considering a European identity in political terms indicates that political identity is an element or variable included in the concept of European identity.

Individuals form a sense of belonging to a political group based on the perception of legitimacy of the political structures and leadership (Cerutti, p. 6). The degree of political identification is based on the perception that the political structures reflect the values and norms of the individual related to the legitimacy of the governance structure. As a result, political identity is a self-identification process in which individuals partly define themselves through their membership in and allegiance to a particular political group. At the same time, political leaders can influence the attitudes and perception of legitimacy through persuasion using information carried in mass media. The way in which political leaders establish a link between the values and norms of the individual and their persuasive message can have a significant positive or negative effect on the degree of political identification (Bruter, 1151).

The political element of European identity can be viewed as an identity construct that exists simultaneously with national identity. In effect, individuals can identify with both their European nation and with the larger political unit of the EU. The degree of identification with the nation and with the EU, however, may depend on the perception of the legitimacy of the political unit and its institutions. In some nations, the development of

a European political identity focused on the EU has benefited to some degree by the erosion in the perception of legitimacy of nation-state governments, with the EU as a replacement political unit (Strath, p. 391). In other nations, however, the legitimacy of the EU is questioned because it is perceived as imposing statutes, regulations inimical to local cultural norms and values (Bruter, p. 1155). As a result, European identity may be weaker or nonexistent in these nations or among segments of a population that perceive the EU as intrusive or burdensome in their lives.

Some perspectives of the nature of political identity adopt a perspective based on economic transact theory by proposing that the degree of loyalty or allegiance to a political entity is derived from the ability to distribute public goods (Hooghe and Marks, p. 118). Citizens of a nation develop a national identity because they can receive public goods benefits from that nation, but not from another nation. In this model, the loyalty or allegiance of citizens would gradually shift to a supranational entity such as the EU as its ability to distribute public goods increases. This view of the underpinnings of political identity links it to concrete factors associated with the political process such as the redistribution of public goods, and does not consider the importance of normative or substantive value factors (Cerutti, p. 7).

The cultural element or variable related to European identity involves the cultural and social factors that influence the development of a common identity. Europeans share many common cultural elements including a common history, and common musical and literary achievements. Modern Europeans also share common political cultural values and ideas such as concepts of the modern nation state, democracy, human rights, individualism, and separation of church and state (Scheuer and Schmitt, p. 509). These political cultural values are normative and create an expectation that national and supranational institutions will adhere to the principles embedded in these values (Cerutti, p. 4). Thus, Europeans have a common cultural basis for defining themselves as a group and for defining cultures existing outside of Europe as non-European. At the same time, many cultural elements exist in Europe creating differences among groups including different ethnic groups with separate cultures, the use of multiple languages, and historical enmities between groups (Lehning, p. 249). Religious differences also exist between Latin and Orthodox Christianity and between Christians and Muslims living in

Europe. The values and norms based on factors such as ethnicity or religion are substantive and have to be considered as important variables affecting the development of a European identity.

Some discourse concerning European identity suggests that the shared political culture or normative values are convergent factors for the development of a European identity while other cultural factors such as religion and history based on substantive values are divergent factors (Lehning, p. 247). This position is based on the premise that the political values related to democracy, human rights, and individualism are the values that are shared throughout Europe. This approach to cultural values, however, assumes that political culture operates independently from other cultural norms and values in the nations of Europe. The common cultural political values such as human rights and separation of church and state are not sufficient to mediate these differences and create a common European identity that transcends cultural factors such as ethnic and religious differences (Scheuer and Schmidt, p. 510). The inherent conflict between the normative and the substantive factors relating to culture may be the reason for the significant differences among nations in the EU in the degree of European identity in the population.

Evidence of a European Identity

The most basic evidence of the existence of a European identity comes from surveys that investigate self-reported identities of the population in Europe. This type of research is sufficient to determine whether a European identity exists from the perspective of respondents and its relative strength compared to other self-reported identities of the individual. It is insufficient, however, to provide information about the way in which individual understand the construct of a European identity and whether they consider the EU as a political institution embodying the fundamental elements of European identity (Hooghe and Marks, 122). Nonetheless, surveys provide sufficient data to indicate that a European identity exists, but differs among nations and among communities with nations.

The Eurobarometer surveys provide some indication of the trends in the development of a European identity. The data obtained in the most recent survey (European Commission, p. 34) indicates that 74 per cent of the respondents feel that

they are European and 32 per cent feel they are European to a great extent, with feeling European as a proxy measure for European identity. This data not only confirms the existence of a European identity, but also shows a trend towards a larger proportion of the population reporting that they feel they are European. In 2004, the Eurobarometer survey showed that only 58 per cent of the respondents felt they were European (Lutz, Kritzing, and Skirbekk, p. 425). This trend is significant because it suggests that the long range trend is toward growth in the number of individuals developing a European identity, which may influence the proportion of the population that accepts the EU as a political institution representing the norms and values associated with European identity.

The data concerning European identity, however, also indicated that wide disparities existed among nations in the percentages of individuals indicating that they felt European. The highest percentages of individuals reporting that they feel European were in Germany and the Scandinavian countries while the United Kingdom and Greece had the lowest percentage (European Commission, p. 35). In addition, a relationship existed between a higher education level among respondents and a reported European identity, which indicates that socio-demographic variables may influence the perception of European identity. In addition, older respondents were less likely to feel European, possibly because of the stronger influence of national and local cultural factors during their lifetimes. The implications of these socio-demographic findings are also positive for the long-term development of the European identity necessary to support EU integration. A higher proportion of the population is likely to develop a European identity as the population becomes better educated and the younger generation ages.

The data from the Eurobarometer survey also indicated 94 per cent of all Europeans have a national identity with the country in which they live and 91 per cent have a regional identity. This data indicates that European identity and national identity are concurrent constructs, with individuals able to integrate both identities. In addition, a regional identity, which can include identification with sub-national ethnic or cultural communities, is substantially higher than the percentages who claim a European identity. This data suggests that national or regional identity is more important to Europeans than European identity, and may receive a higher priority when regional or national identity conflicts with European identity.

While the data from the Eurobarometer indicates that a European identity exists, the factors that are critical for the identity remain unclear. The Eurobarometer survey found that the political cultural factor of democratic values is the most important factor defining European identity (European Commission, p. 39). Democratic values are a normative factor, and create the expectation that the EU will operate in a democratic manner to preserve its legitimacy. At the same time, democratic values have become an important part of the political culture in many other nations outside of Europe and are no longer a distinctively European value that is capable of defining European identity (Scheuer and Schmidt, p. 510). While democratic values may be a part of the European identity, they do not inherently define an individual as European.

The respondents in the Eurobarometer survey also noted that geography next two most important elements of a European identity (European Commission, p. 39). The significance of geography implies that mere residence in Europe is sufficient to create a European identity, and is contradictory to the theories proposing that political and cultural factors are instrumental for developing a common group identity (Gvozden, p. 9; Lehning, p. 247). Geography is a substantive factor, with residence in a particular nation as a tenuous basis on which to expect allegiance to a supranational organisation such as the EU. There was, however, an apparent negative relationship at the national level between the perception that democratic values are the most important factor contributing to European identity and the perception that European identity is based on geography.

A high level of social protection followed geography as the next most important factor contributing to a European identity, and is a substantive factor derived from the policies adopted by the EU. The importance attached to social protection by the respondents indicated that many individuals base their European identity on the ability of the EU to distribute public goods and social benefits (Hooghe and Marks, p. 118). Regardless of whether the social benefit is tangible in the form of goods or intangible in the form of legal protections for certain behaviours, some individuals appear to derive their sense of European identity from the benefits they receive from the EU. A substantial percentage of respondents also noted that a common history and a common culture were important factors contributing to a European identity. These two factors conform to the general theoretical propositions that identification with a group is based on common

values and norms. They provide evidence that some individuals rely on cultural factors to define their European identity as distinct from the identities of individuals from other parts of the world.

The factors identified by the respondents in the Eurobarometer survey relating to national identity indicated that both substantive and normative factors contributed to national identity. Most respondents in the survey defined their national identity based on the fact of birth in the nation, which is a substantive factor similar to the geographic factors influencing the perception of European identity (European Commission, 42). An equal percentage of respondents in the survey, however, defined their national identity as feeling a national identity. While the concept of feeling a national identity is not clear, it could be a normative evaluation involving agreement with the values and beliefs embedded in a national culture. The respondents also noted that sharing cultural traditions was a significant factor in national identity. When these same questions were asked about European identity, the response pattern was similar with most individuals noting that birth in Europe, feeling European and common cultural traditions were the most important factors contributing to European identity. As a result, the respondents believed that the elements influencing national and European identity were similar.

The data concerning the factors contributing to a European identity supports the position of Strath (p. 388) arguing that the meaning of the concept is fluid and subject to a wide range of interpretations. The data indicates that individuals believe that both normative and substantive factors contribute to developing a European identity. Variability also exists concerning the importance of political factors and cultural factors in the construct of European identity. A particular shortcoming of the data provided by the Eurobarometer survey, however, is the lack of information concerning the way in which individuals prioritise their respective national and European identities when a conflict arises.

Some evidence suggests that in situations involving a conflict between European and national interests, individuals often give national interests a higher priority, with European identity functioning as a weak construct for many people in Europe. The current financial problems in Greece provide an example of the weakness of the European identity as an influence on the perceptions of citizens. In many nations such as

Germany, there is strong popular opposition to providing financial assistance to Greece because of the possibility that it will have a local effect on governmental revenues and expenditures, although the EU governments are likely to provide the assistance. This opposition in Germany occurred despite the high percentage of individuals in the nation who feel as if they are European (European Commission, p. 34). The opposition suggests that many Europeans continue to identify primarily with their nation and the benefits provided by the nation, although they may continue to believe they also have a European identity.

Some research has established the existence of a European identity in terms of some common political or civic factors. Bruter (1158) used an experimental method involving assessment of subject responses to information or symbols related to the EU when compared to the responses to information or symbols related to the individual's home nation related to both political and civic perceptions. The findings indicated that most subjects believed in the construct of a European identity. Some of the indicators of the existence of a European identity were subjects favouring European sports teams in international competition, preference for the use of an EU passport, and belief that the EU flag should be flown next to national flags. The findings suggest that a European identity exists when assessed using both political and cultural variables. The findings also determined that the strength of the European identity increased in response to persistent positive information about the benefits or value of European integration and weakened in response to negative information. This finding suggests that the intensity or strength of the European identity may be variable and depend on the specific events taking place before identity is measured. In general, however, the research confirmed that a European identity exists.

Conclusion

The analysis of the construct of European identity demonstrates that the identity exists and but primarily has a cultural dimension. The existence of a European identity is confirmed by the relatively high percentage of the population reporting that they feel European. The cultural dimensions of European identity appear consist of political cultural elements such as shared democratic values and traditional cultural elements

such as common history and traditions. Despite this evidence, however, the analysis showed that the prevalence and understanding of the meaning of European identity had substantial theoretical and practical variations. Some individuals believe that European identity springs from a shared political culture emphasising democratic norms and values. Other individuals, however, believe that European identity depends on geographic location and is not related to political structures or culture. At the same time, the analysis showed that the movement toward integration has gradually produced some strengthening in European identity with the numbers of people reporting that they feel European increasing over time.

The analysis of European identity also indicated the identity construct does not currently have sufficient strength to transcend or subsume the national identity of most individuals. The number of individuals reporting that they have a national identity based on shared political norms, cultural values and traditions derived from the nation where they were born or reside is far higher than the number reporting that they have a European identity. There is also some indication that many people will subordinate European identity to national identity in situations in which the values associated with each identity is in conflict.

The analysis also suggests that European identity is an evolving concept that is responding to the political, economic, and cultural interaction between individual nations and the policies and institutions of the EU. At the current time, a European identity exists but is not as robust as the national identities of the residents of the individual member states. The trend, however, is toward the gradual formation of a European identity shared by all residents of Europe, with the specific elements of the identity likely to focus on common elements of the shared political culture.

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