

Prospects for a European Identity

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Abstract In several respects, the EU represents both a novel system of quasi-supranational governance and a novel form of political community or polity. But it is also a fragile construction for it remains a community still in the making with an ambiguous sense of identity and within which powerful forces are at work. This paper has three main aims: first, to stress the shifting nature of Europe’s geographical frontiers and assess whether cultural frontiers have remained more stable throughout time. In particular, it examines the main criteria, which have traditionally been employed when having to decide who should be included and excluded from Europe. A different question concerns the requirements for EU membership and the monopoly of the adjective “European” by the EU, which somehow has become to be identified with Europe. Second, to explore the prospects for the emergence of a European identity. Here, I argue that European identity stands as a “non-emotional identity” in sharp contrast with traditional forms of national identity associated with intense nationalist feelings. Third, through the analysis of the most recent *Eurobarometer* (annual survey of EU’s public opinion) to examine the views of Europeans regarding the EU at a time of a major global economic crisis. To conclude, the paper explores the main challenges to be faced by a still incipient European identity.

Keywords European identity · Boundaries of Europe · EU image · EU dissatisfaction · Enlargement

Introduction: The Shifting Boundaries of Europe

Europe is a cultural reality that spreads well beyond the boundaries of the European Union. In recent times, it has become common practice to identify Europe with the EU. Yet, when people refer to “European integration,” “European citizenship and laws,” “European institutions,” or the generation of a “European identity,” they usually employ the term

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“European” to refer to the processes of consolidation and greater integration lead by the European Union.

Europe is generally understood to include the western portion of the Eurasian landmass, together with a number of islands not far from the mainland (Iceland, Corsica, Malta, Sardinia, Sicily, Crete, and Ireland as well as Great Britain), however, this does not provide a clear-cut idea of where Asia stops and Europe begins.

Precisely where the division between Europe and Asia lies is a matter of some debate. To understand Europe as a geographical area involves awareness of Europe's shifting boundaries. The Greeks conceived a water-bound Europe whose borders lay on the Black Sea and its northern extension, the Sea of Azov, as far as the banks of the river Don. From the eighteenth century though, Europe has often been understood to end (or begin) with the Ural Mountains and the river that takes its name from them and flows into the Caspian Sea. But this carries some ambiguities. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, it leaves Transcaucasia and the newly independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in an uncertain relation with regard to Europe, while Turkey also lies to the west of the Urals.

The geographical boundaries of Europe have suffered dramatic changes throughout time; even the most recent past offers different examples, which illustrate the shifting character of European borders. The post-1989 unification of Germany, the separation of Czechoslovakia, the break-up of Yugoslavia, the independence achieved by the Baltic Republics, and the dismembering of the Soviet Union illustrate dramatic border changes within European countries taking place in the last 15 years. Further to this, we should consider the claims of countries such as Turkey, which are currently asserting their European character and demand the right to be included within the European Union.

The 2004 and 2007 enlargements of the EU have strengthened the idea that the boundaries of Europe are not fixed and that the boundaries of the EU, which is often identified with “Europe,” are not fixed either. It follows from this that the definition of Europe and indeed who is included and who is excluded from Europe tends to change throughout time. The description of Europe, or any other territory, as a “geographical” entity invariably implies the absence of more elevated claims associated with the embodiment of some general values and a sense of shared identity, as loose as it may be, among its citizens.

But, is it possible to identify any clear elements of historical continuity pointing at a pre-existent idea of Europe? In my view, this is extremely difficult and controversial since Europe's history is fraught with confrontation and war. Geography and history appear to be insufficient criteria to decide whom should and who should not be included in Europe. In their effort to find some commonalities shared by those who call themselves “Europeans” many scholars and politicians have turned to defend the idea that what unites Europeans is the sharing of a certain culture and values which differentiate them from other peoples, more crucially from Eastern peoples. This argument is based upon the assumption that “there has always been a different way of life between East and West, between the full and half European ... between real Europeans, and those caught in a nether world between the European and Asian” (Burgess 1997, p. 67).

Some scholars (Ashcroft & Timms 1992; Goddard, Llobera, & Shore 1994; Scully 2005; Wolton 1993) consider Europe as a system of values and mention the impact of Christianity (Faltin & Wright 2007) and the rise of a set of ideas including those of freedom, humanism, and material progress as key elements in the construction of an incipient European identity.

The “idea of Europe” did not begin by reference to geographical or historical divisions. Instead, it emerged as a term connected to a specific cultural and political heritage

embodied in Athenian democracy. It was not until the nineteenth century that George Grote, a radical banker and historian, located the origin of European civilization in Greek democracy, rather than in the establishment of Christianity towards the end of the Roman Empire.

Currently, there is a substantial body of literature (Davies 1997a; Nugent 2006; Pinder 1998; Urwin 1995; Wallace, Wallace & Pollack 2005) which highlights European unity above the diversity among European peoples. The search for a common past and traditions responds to the desire to identify or invent some elements capable of acting as pillar blocs in the construction of a shared sense of European identity, which, ideally, should go hand in hand with greater EU integration. However, in spite of considerable efforts to define such elements, this is proving a challenging task. The status of Europe as a cultural unit and a system of values at the dawn of the twenty-first century remains problematic. Here, we are confronted with a clear contrast between Europe's strengthening institutional structures and more intensive processes of governance, on the one hand (at least so far as the EU is concerned), and the relative weakness and uncertainty of the values that underpin it on the other.

Religion as an Inclusion–Exclusion Mechanism

Samuel Huntington, in his most celebrated book *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996) has argued that religion provides the best common means of historically distinguishing between Europeans and the rest, which in particular refers to the Judeo-Christian tradition confronting Islam. This argument, however, seems to ignore that in the Middle Ages most intra-European wars had a religious character and that, by and large, such wars did not imply the existence of different civilizations within Europe, rather they consisted of wars between countries defending different and revised “versions” of a religion which had a unique origin. It is precisely from this perspective that it seems plausible to point at religion as a key feature in constructing what we now term as an embryonic European identity. Following this line of argument, Anthony Smith stresses that “there is a clear sense, going back at least to the Crusades and probably even to Charles Martel, in which Europeans see themselves as not Muslims or as not Jews” (quoted in Burgess 1997, p. 67). Should we then conclude that European culture is based upon Christianity and that the cultural boundaries of Europe are determined by religion? This raises two main issues.

First, is the appeal to a shared religion a recent invention? Were Charles the Great and the crusaders convinced that the religious divide between those who believed in God and those who did not was to reflect a deeper division between Europeans and the rest? Furthermore, early Europe as Christendom already contained significant religious minorities (Jews and Muslims)—and barely included the rural masses whose peasant status was closely linked with a “pagan” (and thus non-Christian) outlook, which presented a constant challenge to the consolidation of any regional Christian realm.

Second, if we were to assume that religion, and Christianity in particular, is the key criteria for inclusion in Europe, what do we make of the religious wars in which European countries fought each other since the Middle Ages? Reflecting on these issues, Adam Burgess writes: “it is only with the Ottoman challenge, coupled with the social and religious crises of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, that Europe became the Christian continent, and therefore distinct limits were drawn Significantly, however, this unity was more apparent than real. Christian Europe was moving into the schisms of those centuries, and the heresies of the sixteenth” (1997, p. 69).

A further point concerns whether religion operates as an inclusion/exclusion mechanism in contemporary Europe and whether, for example, the opposition to Turkey's accession expressed by some EU member-states derives from its Muslim allegiance rather than from the economic and geopolitical concerns often openly invoked by these countries. This is a highly sensitive and controversial issue. The 2004 EU decision to initiate the process of Turkey's accession—subject to a set of conditions—seems to indicate that contemporary Europe is not based upon a religious divide arising from a pre-modern religious outlook on the world. Yet, it should be acknowledged that religion has a powerful impact not only upon the values of a particular society, but also upon its cultures, art, and worldview. In Europe, the Judeo-Christian influence has exerted a powerful influence and it is accurate to assert that Europe's secular culture developed in opposition, debate, confrontation, and/or dialogue with prevailing religions in different European countries.

On Europe's Secular Culture

Machiavelli's work offers an incipient notion of Europe based upon secular principles; however, the idea of Europe did not acquire real meaning until the age of the Enlightenment.¹

During that period, a primarily elitist consciousness felt European identity came to the fore. This stronger "European" consciousness retained a Christian outlook but was now associated with other values, particularly those of a novel and at a fast pace developing European civilization embodied in a rapidly changing Europe turned into a champion of freedom, humanism, and the growing ideas of material progress. According to Den Boer (1995), it was not until the nineteenth century and specifically after the break with tradition prompted by the revolutionary years that the concept of Europe was historicized and politicized. He writes:

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the idea of Europe was projected back much further in history. A search was instigated for the roots of European civilization. Europe, which in the Middle Ages had in fact hardly existed as a geographical expression, became an accepted historical category. The historical writings of the Nineteenth century romantics made it appear that in the Middle Ages there had been a conscious idea of Europe. The notion gained ground that out of the ruins of the Roman empire (the Latin element), the Barbarian peoples (the Germanic element), led by the Christian church, had been amalgamated to form the true European civilization. (p. 50)

The ideas embodied in the Enlightenment took a specific political form in the French Revolution. Napoleon's dissemination of revolutionary ideas throughout the European mainland contributed further to the radical transformation of European societies by prompting a series of dramatic changes that would progressively affect the peoples of Europe. These transformations challenged the so-called *Ancient Régime* and fostered the emergence of an early convergence among European national elites; a factor which emphasized the wide gap separating the mass of the population from Europe's cultural, political, and economic elites.

¹ Enlightenment humanism emerged in France and involved establishing a distinction between those parts of the world engaged in the pursue of the ideas of rationality and progress, which lie at the heart of the Enlightenment, and those enmeshed in pre-rational practices and beliefs. In spite of the superiority, which the "philosophes" attributed to their revolutionary way of thinking, the Enlightenment that they represented did not result in a diminished interest in other areas of the world.

Recent literature suggests that the Enlightenment opened a fracture between the “civilized” West and the “uncivilized” or “barbarian” East (Davies 1997b; Dinan 2006; Hudson & Williams 1999; Moravcsik 1999). It would be misleading, however, to ignore that the Enlightenment also affected the empires of Central and Eastern Europe, a feature, which once more stresses the difficulty of drawing a clear-cut cultural boundary of Europe.

The Enlightenment’s ideas triggered dramatic socio-political transformations in European societies, but they also prompted the adoption of rationality as a method and progress as an objective. It is in this sense that a connection between the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution could be established.

To sum up, after the Enlightenment, competing versions of Europe emerged; liberal and conservative, for or against revolution, constitutional or absolutist forms of government. This process of European incipient convergence was greatly enhanced by the almost simultaneous emergence and spread of the Industrial Revolution. It was from that moment onwards that European societies began to share certain features, which would accentuate the difference between them and those societies “towards the East” which remained untouched by industrialism.

It is not until the twentieth century and after suffering the devastating effects of two World Wars that we can locate the surfacing of a coherently defined idea of Europe, which has served to inspire the European Union (Milward 1984). In this process, the division of Europe into two halves during the Cold War dramatically contributed to re-define its cultural boundaries. In most cases, contemporary criteria for inclusion and exclusion are connected to the role played by countries during World War II and even more crucially by the position held by them either within or without the area of Soviet influence (Clark 2001; De Porte 1986; Lundestad 1998; Niblett & Wallace 2001; Young & Kent 2004).

After World War II, Western Europe (although strongly underwritten by the United States) was clearly regarded as more “European” than the Soviet dominated east, a view that supported the special role played by the EU and its predecessors in the region as a whole. The EU economic success sustained democracy and overall stability strengthened this conception, which still prevails after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

At a time when the EU is moving towards further political and economic integration we are confronted with the question of whether Europe is becoming more united in cultural and social terms or whether, on the contrary, greater divisions are emerging among EU member-states. Currently, different voices are arguing that any new Europe has to be imagined afresh and constructed as a conscious plan of action rather than deduced from existing values. There are, undoubtedly, differing “projects for Europe.” Again, Europe is often conflated with the EU, and although some non-EU countries claim their European credentials, the EU seems to monopolize the idea of Europe as a project, which still remains largely, undefined.

Prospects for a European Identity

The EU is a dynamic political institution, which since its inception has experienced a dramatic expansion and growth in terms of territory and citizen numbers coupled with increasing wealth, productivity, and international presence. Right now, the EU seeks economic and political integration and in so doing it stands up as the most ambitious project promoted by any supranational political institution worldwide. The creation of a single market, the free movement of people and goods across its frontiers, the introduction of the Euro in 2001, and its latest enlargement to include ten new member-states in 2004 and two

more in 2007, have turned the EU into a major global political actor; although one which is still struggling to offer a united voice in some areas, for instance, international relations, foreign policy, and security. The EU embraces a considerable number of nation-states prepared to relinquish some aspects of their own jealously guarded sovereignty in order to benefit from membership of an economically prosperous and dynamic internal market, which has turned the EU into a successful economic global player.

But, how do its own citizens perceive the EU? Do they identify with it? What enables identification to take place? Previous experience shows that identification with the nation-state emerged only after a considerably long period involving the linguistic and cultural homogenization of citizens, the fighting of wars, taxation, the establishment of citizenship rights and duties, the construction of a certain image of the nation endowed with its own symbols and rituals (instilled by the state), the existence of common enemies, and the progressive merging of national education and media systems (Guibernau 2004, p. 140).

In addition, the consolidation of national identity associated with European nation-states has been accompanied by the strengthening of regional identities in nations without states such as Catalonia and Scotland, where a distinct sense of identity based upon a common culture, history, attachment to a clearly demarcated territory, and the will to decide upon its political future has endured for centuries (Guibernau 1999).

In the cases of Catalonia and Scotland, the devolution policies implemented by Spain and Britain has resulted in the construction of autonomous political institutions, which in turn have contributed to reinforce a shared sense of belonging. For instance, when considering regional identity, the study of devolution in Britain and Spain proves that the establishment of autonomous political institutions with sufficient power and resources to rule a territory, and make a difference to the peoples' lives, tends not only to strengthen pre-existing identities but also to breed a sense of belonging and shared identity where it did not previously exist (Guibernau 2007, chap. 2)—for instance, among the citizens of newly created autonomous communities in post-1979 Spain. So far, in Western Europe, compatibility between national and regional identity seems to be able to progress hand in hand with multilayered government, should we then conclude that a further layer of identity, on this occasion of supra-state nature, would automatically emerge among European citizens once they feel the political weight of the EU upon their own lives? The response depends on how we are to define such a new form of collective identity, that is, on what type of attachment we imagine. I argue that European identity cannot be expected to follow the pattern of national identity, simply because the EU is not a nation-state but a new genre of political institution born out of a new socio-political and economic environment shaped by globalization.

The EU is a novel political institution created out of the free will of sovereign nation-states, which continue to establish a sharp distinction between “communitarian” and “domestic” affairs in terms of policy and decision-making. For instance, recognition of national and ethnic minorities as well as devolution models are considered as “internal affairs” and remain in the hands of each particular nation-state.

Ultimately, nation-states set up the aims and structure of the EU while funding and deciding on its budget. In some cases, nation-states employ the EU as an excuse for action or inaction within the domestic arena and, sometimes, they even employ the EU as a scapegoat thus fuelling nationalism and reinforcing national identity. Bearing this in mind, I believe that nation-states are only partially interested in promoting a European identity focused on EU membership since “too much Europe” could potentially weaken national identity and eventually result in refocusing a people's loyalty away from the nation-state and this is not in their own interest.

European identity (Checkel & Katzenstein 2009; Eder & Spohn 2005; Fligstein 2009), as well as national identity when instilled by the state, is a top-down institutionally generated identity designed to foster solidarity bonds among a diverse population. It is also aimed at nurturing feelings of loyalty towards the EU, yet in my view, this is more of a project for the future than a reality.

On How Europeans Regard the EU

Currently, Europeans are split concerning support for EU membership. In 2004, those considering membership of the EU as a “good thing” scored 85% in Luxembourg, 77% in Ireland, 72% in Spain, and a mere 38% in the UK. In contrast, those who considered the EU a “bad thing” amounted to 33% in the UK, 43% in Latvia, 42% in the Czech Republic, and 37% in both Slovakia and Poland (European Commission 2004, p. 8). Sizeable changes were recorded in 2005 when the view that EU membership is a “good thing” decreased from 54 to 50%, to increase again to 53% in 2008 (European Commission 2005, p. 9).

Most recently, the influence of the economic crisis and its impact upon the stability of the euro followed by the debt crisis in Greece and Ireland accompanied by fears of a potential spread to other countries have affected support for EU membership as well as its perceived advantages. The latest survey (European Commission 2010) shows that support for EU membership has fallen to 49% (−4 points since autumn 2009), which is close to the lowest levels recorded in the last decade.

In 2008, membership of the EU was still regarded as a good thing by an absolute majority of Europeans (53%) whilst only 15% of Europeans considered their country’s membership as a bad thing. In contrast, in 2010, the proportion of Europeans who consider their country’s membership a bad thing now stands at 18% (+3 points from autumn 2009; European Commission 2010, p. 11). The only countries where public opinion is more positive in 2010 than it was in 2009 concerning membership of the EU and the advantages derived from it are Hungary, Latvia, and, to a lesser extent, Malta and Poland.

Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)’s membership of the EU is...? -% “A good thing”

	EB72 Autumn 2009	EB73 Autumn 2010	Difference
EU 27 members	53%	49%	−4
Hungary	34%	38%	+4
Latvia	23%	26%	+3
Malta	45%	47%	+2
Poland	61%	62%	+1

Source: European Commission (2010). Eurobarometer 73, p. 14.

Among the countries where public opinion regards membership of the EU as a good thing are Luxembourg (70%), the Netherlands (69%), Ireland (66%), Denmark (66%), and Belgium (64%).

It is significant to note that the impact of the economic crisis has resulted in the largest decline in support for EU membership in Greece (−17). The proportion of Greek citizens who consider that their country has benefited from EU membership has also fallen sharply (−10). Support for membership and the perceived advantages of EU membership have both fallen sharply in Germany (−10; −9) and Cyprus (−13; −8).

Taking everything into account, would you say that (OUR COUNTRY) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Union? -% “Benefited”

	EB72 Autumn 2009	EB73 Autumn 2010	Difference
EU 27	57	53	-4
Cyprus	50	42	-8
Germany	57	48	-9
Greece	71	61	-10
Portugal	64	54	-10
Romania	66	56	-10

Source: European Commission (2010). Eurobarometer 73, p. 14.

The perceived advantages of EU membership have worsened as a result of the economic crisis and EU citizens have come to regard their country's membership of the EU as less positive than in 2009. For instance Greece scores (-17) points when compared with 2009, Cyprus (-13), Slovenia (-11), Germany (-10), Estonia (-10), Slovakia (-9), Portugal (-9), Romania (-9), and the Czech Republic (-9). In the UK, 33% (+3) of respondents regard EU membership as negative while 29% (-1) regard it as positive. At this stage, it is important to highlight that Germany—one of the stronger member-states and net contributor to EU coffers—has experienced a highly significant retreat in support for EU membership as well as the perception of membership as a “positive thing.” Among Europeans, the reasons invoked by those maintaining a negative perception of EU membership are primarily based upon socio-economic issues, the most quoted are:

- Lack of influence of their country upon EU decision-making (33%). Nordic countries feel strongly about this particular point: Sweden (63%), Denmark (61%), and Finland (50%). Some new member-states share this view, Czech Republic (46%), Hungary (45%), and Bulgaria (42%).
- The EU reduces the standard of life of their country and places national jobs in danger (29%). A view that obtains 58% of support in Slovenia and 47% in France.
- EU membership limits economic growth, and in particular, job creation (27%). This obtains 74% in Cyprus, 43% in Ireland, and 42% in France.
- Almost a quarter of respondents (24%) consider that important issues would be dealt with in a most satisfactory manner at national level and 17% argue that EU membership makes their own countries more vulnerable to the negative effects of globalization. (European Commission 2010, p. 150)

In contrast, the survey has found that the main reasons quoted by Europeans when explaining why they regard the EU as a “positive thing” are: the fact that EU membership improves cooperation between their country and other member-states (37%), it contributes to maintain peace and security (31%), EU membership strengthens the position of their country in the world (26%), and improves their employment prospects (24%). The argument about cooperation is the most cited in Sweden (69%), Denmark (65%), and the Netherlands (63%). Peace and security predominates in 21 of the 27 countries of the EU, the highest scores are recorded in Cyprus (63%), Sweden (48%), the Netherlands (47%), and Germany (44%). Improving the economy of the country predominates in Hungary (52%), Estonia (48%), and Ireland (48%).

Why do you regard EU membership of your country as a benefit?

	Improves cooperation	Peace and security	Stronger position in the world	Better employment prospects
EU 27	37	31	26	24

Source: European Commission (2010). Eurobarometer 73, pp. 146–147.

Among the countries that have adopted a neutral stance towards EU membership are Slovenia (43%), Austria (40%), and Cyprus (37%), followed by Latvia (52%), the Czech Republic (51%), and Hungary (45%).

Among candidate countries, support for potential membership has weakened 6 points when compared with 2009. Support for EU membership stands at 60% in Macedonia (−2), 47% in Turkey (+2), and 26% in Croatia (+2). The survey shows that support for EU membership in Iceland is low, only 19% consider that EU membership would be a “good thing,” while 45% consider that it would be a “bad thing” and 32% adopt a neutral stance toward membership (European Commission 2010, pp. 139–140).

At this point, it is important to note that while “trust in national institutions remains stable, trust in the EU has fallen from 48% in autumn 2009 to 42% in spring 2010.” Yet the number of people “who tend not to trust the EU has reached 47% (+7) at a time when more people continue to trust the EU more than their own parliament (31%; +1) or their own government (29%; unchanged)” (European Commission 2010, p. 153). A further and important finding of this survey reveals a growing gap (62% to 35%) between educated and wealthier respondents and non-educated poorer citizens concerning both support for EU membership and knowledge of their rights as citizens of the EU (European Commission 2010, p. 142).

The commitment to democracy is one of the defining features of the EU. According to the 2010 *Eurobarometer*, 54% (+1) of Europeans are satisfied concerning the functioning of democracy in their own countries, while 44% are dissatisfied and only 2% do not express an opinion. The highest degrees of satisfaction are scored in Denmark (92%), Sweden (84%), Luxemburg (83%), Austria (78%), and the Netherlands (75%). In contrast, dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy obtains a majority support in Lithuania (79%), Romania (78%), Bulgaria (73%), Greece (69%), and Portugal (69%; European Commission 2010, pp. 153–154). It is also significant to highlight that there is a significant gap concerning how the functioning of democracy is viewed depending on one’s own position in the social ladder. Yet, 60% of those defining themselves as working class consider that democracy does not work satisfactorily in their own country, while only 36% of those at the top of the social ladder express a similar view.

Undoubtedly, a decline in the perception of a positive EU image combined with a decrease in support for EU membership does not contribute to strengthening an incipient European identity. On the contrary, if such trends were to continue, they would signal the inability of the EU to focus on what unites Europeans rather than allowing for a deepening of existing differences. A sustained decline in the perceived advantages of EU membership holds the potential to weaken the emergence of a cohesive European identity.

Currently, the expectations of some new member-states are not being fulfilled at the speed that they had initially envisaged; if this continues to be the case, it will generate resentment and the construction of deep divisions within the EU. Simultaneously, enlargement is having a considerable impact upon the socio-cultural structures and public opinion of the 15 old member-states. The latest enlargements are extremely recent, this is

true, but the consequences of opening up markets by expanding the territorial boundaries of Europe is likely to exert a powerful socio-economic impact upon European societies, some signs of it are already visible. In addition, enlargement further problematizes existing visions for greater political and social cohesion within the EU. No doubt, the strengthening of a still incipient European identity is further complicated by the accession of the largest contingent ever to join the EU at once since its foundation.

As the latest Eurobarometer confirms, support for the EU is mixed and, critically different percentages are obtained when analyzing overall attitudes and feelings across the 27 member-states, and when studying country-by-country surveys that reveal deep differences among citizens of various member-states.

The EU: A “Non-emotional” Identity

European identity cannot be founded upon the cultural and linguistic homogenization of its citizens, a mistake too often made by nation-states seeking to annihilate internal diversity to create a homogeneous citizenry. National and ethnic minorities claiming the right to cultural and linguistic survival, and in some cases, the right to self-determination, are now contesting such homogenization attempts. In a similar manner, European identity cannot claim to rely upon a common past and it cannot even boast about clear-cut geographical or cultural boundaries.

In contrast, a still embryonic European identity relays on the shared consciousness of belonging to an economic and political space defined by capitalism, social welfare, liberal democracy, respect for human rights, freedom and the rule of law, prosperity and progress. In my view, these are the pillars of a European identity primarily defined by the sharing of a specific political culture and the desire to benefit from the economic advantages derived from EU membership. But, are these sufficient to generate loyalty to the EU? Will support for the EU dwindle if the economic crisis continues to hit it hard?

As I see it, the global economic crisis has the potential to weaken the impetus for European integration and to question the purpose of the EU at a time when the economic prosperity associated with the Union has become of paramount importance to the EU-15 while simultaneously acting as a magnet for those nation-states which joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 as well as for those currently applying for membership. Although it is also true that avoiding Russian influence by firmly placing themselves within Western political and military structures—such as the EU and NATO—is regarded as a guarantee of independence by former Soviet republics now turned into independent nation-states.

The EU is still a fragile institution, and to make it work nation-states have to be convinced that they would not get a finer deal by abandoning the Union. So far, economic prosperity has been driving EU integration and a major failure in this area would undermine the EU's capacity and bring political integration to a standstill situation.

At the moment, the economic incentives of EU membership are important however, the latest *Eurobarometer* shows a significant decline in the perceived advantages of EU membership, a trend already present in Greece, Cyprus, Slovenia, Germany, Estonia, Slovakia, Portugal, Romania, and the Czech Republic (European Commission 2010, p. 15).

Among member-states, the determination to protect national interests is so robust that, in my view, if the economic crisis deepens this could prompt some member-states to believe that they could do better on their own, or by establishing alternative partnerships, or simply by leaving the eurozone. Some may even be encouraged to abandon the eurozone prompting the return of the idea of a “two speeds Europe.” Nevertheless, countries such as

Greece and Ireland—which are facing bailouts by the EU—bitterly resent the austerity measures imposed upon them while at the same time they probably neglect to consider what would be their situation if they had been abandoned to their own devices. It is true that as members of the eurozone, they are unable to control vital elements of their economic destiny such as interest rates and currency. However, for years, both countries—as many others—have benefited from EU membership and from belonging to the eurozone. Currently, many problems seem to arise from the same source and euro membership is unable to protect them from the markets. Under these circumstances, a still feeble and incipient European identity is in danger of suffering a major blow which could result in the resurgence of national identity and the politics of nationalism.

In my view, at least while in its early stages, European identity is best defined as an emergent “non-emotional” identity, in contrast with the powerful and emotionally charged national identities of our time. In its present form, I do not expect European identity to arouse feelings comparable to those inspired by national identity. In a similar manner, I do not anticipate the emergence of a European nationalism powerful enough to mobilize the masses in the name of Europe; it would be problematic to find common causes and interests uniting Europeans and prompting them to sacrifice their own lives in the name of the EU. So far, the nation-state retains the emotional attachment of its citizens and when it becomes alien to them or too wide and distant, individuals turn to regional, ethnic, local, and other forms of identity tying them to more sizeable communities than the EU.

Key Challenges to a EU Identity

In addition to economic success, several other key challenges to the consolidation of a European identity should be mentioned, among them a widening gap between the elites and the masses regarding perceptions and attitudes towards the EU. Although not even European elites share a coherent vision of the EU. Rather, it is possible to identify substantial differences concerning their ideas about the institutional shape the EU should progress towards as well as the degree of political and economic integration it should aim at. Max Haller (1999) highlights the lack of a single project for a EU identity by signaling the existence of “significant differences in their ideas, both among political leaders and elites in different European nation-states, and between different political parties, as well as between economic, political and cultural elites” (pp. 263–296; see also Puntischer-Riekmann 1998).

Up to a point, the gap between elites and the masses materialized in the opposition to the draft Constitution that received a “no” vote in France and the Netherlands in 2005 and the failure of Ireland to sanction the Revised Constitution—*Reform Treaty*—thus opening up a significant crisis at the heart of a EU that once again saw its political integration project halted (Shaw 2007).

Dissatisfaction with the EU’s democratic deficit, concern about the future of social welfare, disagreement on the institutional model propounded for the EU, lack of representation (voice and vote) for constitutional regions such as Catalonia, Scotland, and Flanders, opposition to what is perceived by many as a growing hyper-bureaucratic entity distant from ordinary citizens, inability to speak with a single voice at crucial moments (intervention in the wars of the former Yugoslavia and Iraq), post-enlargement economic adjustments of EU subsidies, and discontent about their own national governments prompted a large number of citizens to vote “no.” Saying “no” to the Constitution and the Reformed Treaty, among other issues, implied that for some, the brand of European identity emerging from the EU’s magna carta does not fulfill their aspirations.

In my view, the emergence of a European identity requires the political will to build a common project for the future, a vision encompassing socio-economic progress, commitment to liberal democracy, and the pledge to replacing conflict by consensus among EU members. When constructing such a project we should be wary of grand ventures, which in the past have resulted in conflict and destruction. Mazower cautions us: “It was thus not preordained that democracy should win over fascism and communism, just as it remains still to be seen what kind of democracy Europe is able and willing to build” (1998, p. xii).

A further challenge to the EU derives from the rise of populist right wing nationalism in the shape of political parties fully integrated within the democratic system which tend to exploit fears of economic and cultural take over by immigrants (legal and illegal), refugees and asylum seekers attracted by the EU’s wealth. Fear of diversity, feelings of being worst off than newcomers regarded as benefiting from social welfare, cultural clashes, prejudice, and difference in life-styles generate anxiety and are encouraging some sectors of the population, many of whom are to be found among the working class, to support right wing often populist parties prepared to be “tough” and place the interests of their own citizens first.

Current debates on whether assimilation, integration, or multiculturalism should prevail are causing heated confrontations in European societies. Evidence of ghettoization, the existence of parallel societies which do not interact with each other, discrimination, racism, clashes between some members of ethnic groups, and confrontation between migrants from different origins have ignited resentment and violence. The outburst of violence registered in France during November 2005 exemplifies this. In addition, the 7 July 2005 London terrorist attacks perpetrated by British citizens of migrant origin have shaken British society to the bone.

Furthermore, the EU’s will to assert its identity as a global political actor through the implementation of a common foreign and security policy including the eventual framing of a common defence policy as envisaged in the *Maastricht Treaty for the EU* (Article B) is proving a challenging objective. Lack of accord among EU leaders has resulted in the absence of a unified EU response to profound crises such as the occupation of Kuwait by Iraq and the subsequent Gulf War (1991), civil war resulting in the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the recognition of new independent states such as Slovenia, Croatia, and Kosovo, and the US-led invasion of Iraq.

To assume that an emotional attachment to the EU should follow suit underestimates the complexity and strength of national identity, which still continues to act as the immediate frame of reference for the majority of citizens. Even accepting that the nation-state is re-casting its nature, I do not think we can announce that it is fading away. In my view, European identity will remain an abstract concept in the medium term and its future will crucially depend on the socio-economic and political consequences of adopting a single currency, successfully managing enlargement and dealing with mass immigration as well as the cultural, social and political questions associated with it.

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