

Migration and the Reassertion of National Identity in Europe

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ABSTRACT: Identity and migration are often seen as descriptive concepts of dissensive qualities involving static, perene aspects versus dynamism and change. However, the opposite can be argued when looking at identity as a flowing, organically changing notion in contrast to a rigid and inflexible migration concept. This article highlights the points of intersectionality between national and European identity and analyzes the impact of the recent migration waves to Europe on the process of identity formation within the European Union.

KEY WORDS: identity, nationalism, migration, European Union

1. Introduction

This article's title and main topic link together two important concepts: identity and migration. At first sight and considering the intrinsic, linguistic qualities of the words, one might assume that the former has a static, descriptive quality while the latter is characterized by dynamism and change. However, as it is to be seen, a deeper approach will show that the opposite could be observed as well: identity as a flowing, organically changing notion and migration as a rigid and inflexible construct which only labels and creates an ideatic space for otherness to flourish.

Thus, the main goal of the article is to identify and describe the factors that contribute and trigger the points of intersectionality between the (reinvention of) national identity and a (designed) European identity and analyze the impact of the migration waves to Europe of last years on the process of identity formation (Manolache 2016a, 99-105).

2. What is identity?

Oxford Dictionary (2019) defines identity as “The fact of being who or what a person or thing is” and/or “The characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is.” As persons are proverbially complex entities with many and diverse facets of being, the identity needs specific qualifiers in order to be described: there are personal identities, gender identities, social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious identities (Rotaru 2016, 30-37; 2015, 595-608)... and the list could continue.

Pertinent to the present endeavor here, I will refer to the concept of social identity as described by Stangor (2011) in his work *Social Identity Theory*: “we draw part of our sense of identity and self-esteem from the social groups that we belong to.”

Narrowing down on the idea of identity as a cognitive-social construct in context of ethnicity and/or nationality, I see nationality as a person’s sense of belonging to one ethnic group, one state or one nation (Manolache 2016b, 67-81).

3. National Identity vs. European Identity

National identity can thus be described as belonging to a social group held together as a cohesive whole by distinctive traditions, culture, language and politics (Ashmore and Wilder 2001, 74 - 75).

Klaus Eder argues that the concept of identity represent a narrative about boundaries (Manolache 2016a, 99-105), common history, common culture language, myths of origin and belonging which has the purpose of creating meaning. But then, if one was to build on Eder’s argument and to apply it to European identity, it becomes clear that in this case there is a misalignment among the cohesive elements.

From the start, the two concepts seem to engage in a contentious interaction: the “organically and naturally emerged” national identity versus the “artificial, designed by the elites” European identity (Eder 2006, 255 - 271).

The European project was created with the aim of ending the frequent and bloody wars between neighboring European countries in the wake of the Second World War. As of 1950, the European Coal and Steel Community

began to unite European countries economically and politically in order to secure a lasting peace (European Union 2019). Even if the reasoning was practical and logical, it came into being artificially and brought together nations which traditionally had relationships characterized by conflict and rivalry.

The next decades saw an enlargement of the Union both in terms of influence and activity culminating with the achievements of the last 20 years among which the most popular were:

- ♦ the Single Market which was completed with the four freedoms: of goods, services, people and capital,
- ♦ the Schengen agreement which gradually allowed people to travel without having their passports checked at European inner borders,
- ♦ barrier-free studies: millions of young people studied in other countries with EU support,
- ♦ and the Union's new currency which was gradually introduced.

In the last 10-15 years, there was an increase in development of supranational governance, also conditioned by international events—like the finance crisis of 2007/2008—which rendered necessary the creation of European financial institutions with supranational mandate (European Union 2019).

In this context, the approach to the European identity as both a common heritage as well as a vision for a common future is deeply conflicted (interestingly enough, the narrative uses the term European *integration* much more frequent than *identity* - maybe to signal the dynamism of the process and its stages?)... Nevertheless, as an artificial construct, the European Union and its ideology were designed to draw their legitimacy only from the public support... and this support wavered for the better part of last decade in the face of what was perceived a continuous decline of national sovereignty. Thus, the identity- driven motivations, the utilitarian/pragmatic ones and the third parties (Hamann 2016)—mostly social media—, have engaged in a highly conflicted process of identity formation led by inflammable narrative.

Complementary to these categories I add a fourth battleground which, I would argue, is missing in Hamann' paper: education. The European dimension in education has two main strands: First, there is the inclusion of a European dimension in all the relevant subjects. Second, there is the

specific curriculum on the European Union, with content on its historical origins and process of formation, the political economic foundations, its values, institutions, and how they impact the everyday life of European citizens (Hartmann et al. 2017).

In 2017, EUROCLIO (European Association of History Educator) —on European Commission’s mandate—, brought together educators from all 28 EU member states to research how European integration is taught in secondary school education across Europe; their findings could be summarized as following:

1. The European Project and European integration are presented as arising primarily from material interests of nation-states (such as prosperity or peace) rather than ideas and values (such as solidarity or European unity).

2. The textbooks used in classes tend to emphasize treaties, political figures and institutions rather than the actual connection of European integration to everyday lives of citizens (such as European citizenship). Students could thus get the view of an elitist project that is not as relevant for their lives as the respective nation-state is, and the European project is presented as a succession of treaties rather than a lively project arising from shared values and identity.

3. Many textbooks do highlight positive outcomes of European integration (such as the common market, peace, or cooperation), but all core challenges which the EU faces (migration, intra-EU differences, and ‘no challenges’) are questioning core values of the European idea, solidarity and shared identity and are not represented in the manuals as debates nor as common themes (Hartmann et al. 2017).

The visuals in textbooks are pictures, maps and cartoons. The main topics of the present EU are the common market and the Euroscepticism. Federalists are effectively neglected. All the pictures and cartoons lay the emphasis on the respective member state (Hartmann et al. 2017).

4. The European Nationalism

Furthering this concept of tension and conflict between national and European identity, let’s take a closer look at the core of the nationalist ideology as it has endeavored to reinvent itself in the European narrative and, more recently, in the context of the migrant crisis due (mainly) to the Syrian civil war.

The right-wing, populist European political movements have a long tradition on the political arena with corner stones that have always been there like provocative, xenophobic statements or explicit anti-immigrant platforms; other elements changed over time going from a small government and free market agenda to supporting pro nationalist social democracy principles like national welfare states, benefits and social programs... but only conationals (Eger and Valdez 2015, 1150-130).

According to Eger & Valdez (2015, 117) the ideological paradigm of nationalism (or neo-nationalism as they differentiate) shifted from nation-building to nation-maintaining, thus from creating to conserving and preserving national law, traditions, values or ethnic unity. The ideology, however, can be vague, as the European nationalist movements are—through their nature—, populist movements, protest parties, focused on dismantling an existing political direction, and, consistent with the populist concept, more often than not, not following with a consistent political program, the essence of their movement being the protest as such. This is why their political agendas can cover both the left and the right political views. Hence, it is not surprising that the European Union and its ideology became the personification of all things bad in the eyes of the neo-nationalist movements across Europe characterized by a strong eurosepticism.

The European elections held in 2014 saw a shift to the right as more Eurosceptics were elected into the European Parliament. Since then some earth-shattering events took place: Trump's presidency, Brexit, Brazil's new far right presidency, Hungary and Poland declared allegiance to "illiberal democracies" are only some of them. Interestingly enough, the tip of the spear in the far right rhetoric was migration and almost only migration (Tilman 2013, 566-589). The public discourse has been characterized by othering through the vilifying of non-white people and of cultural and religious diversity, a profound stereotyping of immigrants as a uniform group and a rhetoric of fear for one's existence in light of the threat posed by a foreign, unknown migrant. The usage of opposing elements like *us vs them*, *in vs out*, *superior vs. inferior*, *civilized vs uncivilized*, *aggression vs defensiveness* automatically positions the public in the context of combativeness.

Conclusion

On the course of this article, I've endeavored to mirror the concepts of national vs. European identity and see how the recent narrative on migration can serve or prejudice them. And although the migrant waves at the middle of this decade did not create the European nationalist predicament, it surely offered a platform and helped become main stream politics and a socially acceptable credo.

Nevertheless, since late 2017 one can observe a shift in the public perception of European identity, especially among the demographic 20-40 years old both in Europe but also in Austria. A Parliament Eurobarometer survey, published in May 2018, one year before European elections in May 2019, confirmed a growing support for the European Union from the European citizens (European Parliament 2018).

The elections for the European Parliament in May 2019 saw an increase in participation as The European Parliament's Post-Election Eurobarometer—a survey on 28000 people throughout EU—, showed: “The most common reason for voting in the recent European Parliament elections was because people felt it was their duty as a citizen (52%), and this has gained in importance since 2014 (+11 pp). Compared with 2014, respondents are also more likely to say that they are in favour of the EU (25%, +11 pp) and because voting can make things change (18%, +6 pp)” (European Parliament 2019).

At the same time, the attitude regarding the European membership has changed since 2014: “Just under six in ten Europeans (59%) see their country's EU membership as a good thing. This level of support is unchanged since February-March 2019, but fell slightly since the historical high level recorded in September 2018 (62%). However, the long-term trend is positive since 2011 and in particular since autumn 2014, after the previous European elections. In the EU28 overall, more than two-thirds of respondents (68%) think their country has benefited from EU membership, the joint highest level recorded since 1983. A majority of people in all Member States—except for Italy—share this view” (European Parliament 2019).

If these surveys can serve as indicators for popular preferences concerning the elections on national and European level, it could be that

the events of the last decade, the rise of the right and its ideology triggered a counter-movement within the social society and a counter-rhetoric based on inclusion, diversity and a mutually inclusive identity.

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