



ORIGINAL PAPER

European Identity in the Context of Economic, Political and Cultural diversity

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Abstract:

This paper explores the construction of European identity in the context of economic, political and cultural diversity within the European Union. The central argument is that European identity does not replace national identities but rather complements them, functioning as a distinct layer of affiliation grounded primarily in shared values and political principles.

The analysis begins by examining the relationship between national and European identities, drawing on constructivist theories of nationalism. It highlights that national identity itself is not a fixed or natural given, but a historically constructed phenomenon, which opens the possibility for the development of a supranational identity. In this context, the concept of constitutional patriotism is used to frame European identity as based on adherence to democratic values, rather than ethnic or cultural homogeneity.

The paper further investigates the impact of economic and political asymmetries within the European Union. It argues that structural inequalities between member states, often conceptualized in terms of center-periphery dynamics, can undermine solidarity and contribute to the rise of Euroscepticism. Finally, the study addresses cultural and religious diversity, emphasizing that European identity cannot be built through homogenization. Instead, it must rely on the recognition and integration of diversity, as reflected in the European Union's motto "United in diversity." While acknowledging the historical influence of Christianity, the paper argues that contemporary European values are largely secularized and compatible with pluralism.

Keywords: *European Identity, National Identity, Economic and political differences, Cultural and religious diversity.*

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Introduction

The issue of European identity represents one of the most complex and debated topics of contemporary reflection on the European integration process. Beyond the institutional, legal and economic dimension of the European Union, the question arises whether there is a coherent form of belonging that transcends the borders of nation-states and offers individuals a common symbolic framework. In this sense, European identity is often analyzed in relation to national identities, cultural and religious diversity, but also to the economic and political asymmetries existing between member states.

This paper aims to analyze how European identity is constructed in the context of this diversity, arguing that it is not constituted in opposition to national identities, but as a complementary level of belonging, of a predominantly normative and political nature. At the same time, it is influenced by the economic and cultural differences existing within Europe, which can function both as resources and as obstacles in the symbolic integration process.

National identity and European identity

First, the question arises whether national identities can be an obstacle or a lever in the formation of a European identity. This issue is old and much discussed. At first glance, the attachment to the nation of origin, to common values and traditions would represent an obstacle to a new identity attachment: the European one. On the principle that, in order to create a new identity, we must give up our current one, some thinkers have become skeptical about building a European identity, on the grounds that the strength of the bond that an individual has with their nation is greater, due to its antiquity, common history, language, customs and collective memory. However, modern theories of nationalism do not support the natural or immutable character of national identity. Ernest Gellner suggested that attachment to the nation is the result of complex historical and social processes, not a spontaneous and inevitable bond. „Nationalist theory pretends that culture is given to the individual, nay that it possesses him, in a kind of ideological *coup de foudre*. But, in the love of nations as in the love of men, things tend to be more complex than the mystique of spontaneous passion would allow” (Gellner, 1993: 16). In the same vein, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an "imagined community", emphasizing that collective identities are constructed through institutions, discourses and symbolic practices (Anderson, 2000: 11-12). This perspective allows the analysis to be extended to the European level, where identity is not a given, but a process in the process of being established.

On the other hand, some authors can be noted as enthusiastic about creating a new European identity, based on the same principles as the constitution of national identity. It is only a matter of changing attachments, without denying existing ones. Benedetto Croce captures this idea when he states that Europeans will end up turning their thoughts towards Europe, without denying their previous identities, but integrating them into a broader framework (Croce, 1959: 430).

I do not deny that the connection between the individual and the nation is one and of an affective nature, but we consider that it is not necessary to replace one attachment with another (Ghenea, 2026a). It is not necessary that the same factors that underlie attachment to the nation also constitute the premise of a European identity. Nor does it need to be an identity of the same type as the national one. European identity can function as a distinct level of belonging, without entering into direct competition with national identity. In this sense, the concept of “constitutional patriotism”, proposed by Jürgen

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Habermas, provides a relevant theoretical framework (Habermas, 1996). European identity is not based on ethnicity, language or tradition, but on adherence to common values and principles, such as democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights (Ghenea, 2014b). European identity therefore depends more on the possibility of sharing these values than on the existence of a homogeneous cultural background. The values of tolerance, solidarity, mutual respect, peace and democracy are those that, through education and cultural policies, can support the formation of a European identity (Ghenea, 2014a). This does not imply the amputation of existing identities, but the consolidation of a common identity, which commits us all through the sense of belonging to contemporary European culture and civilization.

Economic and political differences

As we know, the European Union was founded on economic and political reasons. These can represent solid levers for the creation of a European social and cultural unity, but they can also constitute, through the differences they create, an obstacle to the achievement of this unity. Gabriela Tănăsescu highlights the instrumental-institutional character of the European Union, drawing attention to the fact that the expression "European identity", although frequently used, "appears to lack consistency, its own substance" (Tănăsescu, 2013: 112).

Robert Schuman's declaration of 9 May 1950 highlighted the fact that European peace could be secured through economic cooperation. The pooling of basic resources was seen as a first step towards a European federation capable of preventing conflicts. Thus, the economic dimension was the foundation of a broader political project (Zorgbibe, 1998: 42-43).

We note that peace is the goal of a united Europe, but a first step in achieving it is economic. Economic collaboration, which will have the effect of improving the well-being of the parties involved, will lead to overcoming conflicts, ultimately succeeding in establishing peace. Many European elites, seriously committed to consolidating the Union project, agree with the bright perspective outlined by Schuman. The European Union is seen as an institutional aggregate, which is capable of protecting us from the great social, economic and political problems of the European past. It can bring peace and prosperity among the member countries, something impossible to achieve by national governments alone.

However, the development of the European Union has generated significant asymmetries between the member states. Economic differences between West and East, as well as between North and South, have led to the emergence of a "multi-speed" Europe. These realities can also be interpreted through the lens of the core-periphery model, in which developed economies occupy a dominant position and less developed ones are integrated in a dependent manner. These differences influence the perception of the European Union and contribute to the emergence of Euroscepticism. The attitude towards the "European dream" is differentiated, ranging from enthusiastic support to reasoned criticism or outright rejection. The specialized literature distinguishes between hard and moderate Euroscepticism, depending on the degree of opposition to European integration. The phenomenon was initially specific to the U.K., becoming an emblem of the English attitude towards the project of political and economic integration of continental Europe, which ultimately led to Brexit, however, various forms of Euroscepticism were assumed in political debates throughout Europe. The term *Euroscepticism* seems to have entered British political and journalistic language since the mid-1980s. *The Oxford English*

Dictionary defines Eurosceptic as "a person who is not enthusiastic about the growing power of the European Union" and provides a quote from an article in *The Times*, from June 1986, as a reference for the first use of the term (Harmsen & Spiering, 2004: 12; Arató & Kaniok, 2009: 40). Initially, the term *Euroscepticism* is associated with an anti-integrationist attitude, but, in the case of the U.K., it refers to a broader context (George, 2000: 15-33). At its core, British Euroscepticism is more than an opposition to the institutions that have been assumed by European integration; it has deeper, cultural and even literary roots, in which the continental part of Europe (dominated by the French and Germans) is perceived in terms of otherness (Spiering, 1997: 97-112). This perception of certain states or parts of Europe leads to deeper differentiations than those of a political and economic nature, affecting the idea of European identity. The phenomenon of Euroscepticism is not limited to political elites, but is also found among citizens. In the case of the U.K., it has deep cultural roots, being associated with a perception of continental Europe as otherness. The orientation towards the English-speaking space and the special relationship with the United States have contributed to this symbolic distancing. This sense of otherness from the continental European, seen as the other, is often associated with a certain sense of solidarity with a wider community of English speakers. We could say that the British look more towards the West, towards the United States, to which they feel closer in many ways, not just linguistically. The special link with the United States and other English-speaking countries may constitute, in the opinion of some authors, what can be called an *Anglosphere*, seen as a tacit alternative to European integration (Tiersky, 2001: 299-300).

Euroscepticism is not unique to the British, but extends to political debates within the continent. When this attitude is adopted, it depends on the social, political and cultural context of the country concerned, as well as on the citizens' experience of the European integration process. It is clear that this type of attitude raised specific issues related to European identity in the respective countries. In the case of the British, the otherness towards continental Europe had a certain historical and cultural tradition. In northern Europe we encounter what some authors call "Nordic superiority", an attitude specific to Swedes and Norwegians, but even in countries without a Eurosceptic tradition, a change in the discourse on European integration is observed (for example, in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Ireland) (Sunnus, 2004: 193-206).

In Central and Eastern Europe, the discourse has evolved differently. During the period when they were candidate states, they displayed a Eurosceptic attitude, while when the chances of integration increased and they finally joined the European Union, they perceived this change as a "return to Europe or to the West" (Harmsen & Spiering, 2004: 26). But the asymmetric relations between the states remained visible. Persistent economic gaps contribute to perceptions of inequality and subordination.

First-mover advantage creates a pole of power between the founding countries of the Union and those that have joined for a longer time. What can prevent the time lags in accession, followed by (or underlying) economic gaps, from providing equal opportunities for all countries that have joined or will join the Union? Of course, officially (under the imperative of a fair policy and economy) they will have equal opportunities, but how will things be in reality? You don't have to be a Eurosceptic to ask yourself such a question. There are opinions that, from an economic perspective, there are no equal opportunities between the countries that founded the European Union or that joined immediately after and those that joined successively in the decades that followed. The relationships are rather one of subordination of the latter, and possibly, exploitation by the former. The

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economic gaps between the countries of Western and Eastern Europe are well known, to which can be added those between North and South. The interest of the great economic powers of Europe would not be to support the less developed countries to integrate successfully, but to use them to increase their own power.

The case of Greece is illustrative of the tensions generated by these asymmetries. The economic crisis and austerity measures have been interpreted by some authors as evidence of the limits of the European economic model. Although such interpretations may be reductive, they reflect real social perceptions that influence citizens' attitudes towards the European project. Despite the fact that from the mid-1990s to the first decade of the 21st century, Greece tended towards economic growth, starting in 2008 it found itself in a growing crisis, due to goods imported from rich European countries, due to banking speculation, etc. When this flawed development model collapsed, a stabilization and reform program was adopted, which mainly involved increasing taxes and reducing public spending. In order to implement the reform, Greece signed a contract ('Memorandum') with the IMF, the European Union and the European Central Bank. This program had two components: a stabilization component, through which Greece would achieve budget surpluses with which it would be able to pay its debt, and a reform component, through which it would be able to encourage investment. Some authors believe that, despite the declared goal of getting Greece out of the crisis, this program led to the worsening of the situation (Tsipras, 2014: 6).

Beyond the strictly economic aspects and social consequences of the Greek crisis, Tsipras suggests that the situation is due to the wrong decisions of the European Union. Such decisions would not have their origin in ignorance of economic realities and processes, but in indifference or, worse, in the pursuit of economic interests. The fictitious nature of the reform is due, in the author's opinion, to the fact that there is no real intention for reform in Greece, the aim being only the gain of the institutions and European powers involved. In this context, the economic dimension also acquires a symbolic significance. The single currency is not only an economic instrument, but also a symbol of European unity (Ghenea, 2026b). Economic instability thus affects not only material well-being, but also identity cohesion. The economic security offered by membership in the European Union, and especially the single currency, is shaken when some countries go bankrupt. This may also herald a bleak scenario for other European states that have adopted the single currency or are about to do so. In addition, it could lead to Euroscepticism in the case of countries that have not yet joined the E.U.

Capitalism and neoliberal political and economic ideology are the main accused by Tsipras, who puts forward the idea of a conspiracy carried out by a small number of capitalists in pursuit of profit (Tsipras, 2014: 8). Obviously, this type of thinking is very close to Marxist ideology, and the author's arguments are questionable. However, we note that although at first glance, Euroscepticism involves political and economic aspects, when radicalized by the situation of an economic crisis, it involves aspects related to European identity.

In this context, the concept of "multi-speed Europe" becomes relevant to describe the differentiated dynamics of European integration. It refers to the fact that Member States do not advance uniformly in the integration process, with some benefiting from a higher degree of economic development and superior institutional capacity, which allows them to participate more actively in common projects (e.g. the euro area or the Schengen area), while others remain in a peripheral position. This reality can also be analyzed through the lens of the world system theory proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein, which

distinguishes between centers, semi-peripheries and peripheries, depending on the level of economic development and the position in the international division of labor (Wallerstein, 1974). Applied at the European level, this perspective suggests that Western European states occupy a central position, characterized by consolidated economies and increased political influence, while Central and Eastern European states are integrated more as peripheries or semi-peripheries, dependent on capital flows and economic decisions of the center. Under these conditions, European integration risks reproducing or even accentuating these structural inequalities, affecting social cohesion and the perception of the fairness of the European project.

Cultural and religious diversity

Cultural heritage and religious affiliation are important factors in building identity. The question arises: how do these factors act in the formation of European identity? Are we Europeans regardless of religion and culture? Although a significant part of the values associated with the European Union today can be historically linked to the Christian tradition, they have, over time, been secularized and universalized, becoming part of a normative framework compatible with religious and cultural pluralism.

The problematic nature of cultural homogenization is highlighted by Alain Dieckhoff, who emphasizes that Europe lacks coercive mechanisms for cultural uniformity. Furthermore, such uniformity would be incompatible with the democratic values promoted by the European Union (Dieckhoff, 2003: 221).

Europeanization does not mean uniformity by erasing differences and imposing values, even fundamental ones. Identity is built from within, and European identity is not possible without accepting diversity. The task would be to open access to values, to cultivate them (Ghenea, 2015). Cultural experience, even if it is not independent of a common background and cultural heritage, is and must be individual. European identity is not built by eliminating differences, but by accepting and valuing diversity. The *motto* “Unity in diversity” reflects this orientation, emphasizing that cultural pluralism is a resource. It was first used in 2000 with the aim of showing that European unity aims for peace and prosperity, but under the conditions of acceptance of diversity and openness to cultural values, traditions and national languages. The possibility of this goal is widely debated (Farrell, Fella & Newman, 2002 and Arts, Hagenaars & Halman, 2003).

As regards religion, although the Christian tradition has profoundly influenced European culture, the values promoted by the European Union today have been largely secularized. They cannot be attributed exclusively to a religious tradition, being compatible with confessional pluralism and non-religious options. From a secular perspective, European identity can be interpreted as the result of political modernity, the Enlightenment and the development of the rule of law, rather than as the expression of a specific religious tradition. European belonging does not depend on religion, but on participation in a common normative framework.

Conclusions

European identity cannot be reduced to a single model, nor understood as a replica of national identities. It represents a complex form of belonging, built at the intersection of shared values, institutions and diverse historical experiences. Rather than substituting national identities, European identity complements them, functioning as an additional layer of symbolic and political integration.

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Europe's economic and cultural diversity is both a challenge and a resource. Economic asymmetries can generate tensions and mistrust, fueling Euroscepticism, while cultural pluralism requires a model of coexistence based on tolerance and mutual respect.

European identity is not a given, but a process under continuous construction, dependent on the European Union's capacity to manage differences and to consolidate an inclusive framework. The future of this identity depends not only on economic and political developments, but also on how European citizens will manage to relate to diversity as a constitutive element, not as an obstacle.

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