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Fostering a European identity

Is a European identity important for further European integration?

Bachelor's thesis

NTNU
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

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1. Introduction

The idea of a united Europe has been recurring throughout history. The Holy Roman Emperors, Napoleon, Hitler, and others have all sought in some way to unite Europe. Different principles of unity shaped their approaches on how to unite the continent; alliances, ethnic cohesion, ideology, or ultimately the idea of one powerful nation under one flag.

The European Union (EU) can arguably be considered as a modern attempt to unite the European continent. The predecessor of the EU began with only six cooperating nations, it has developed from a "European Coal and Steel Community" to a Common Market, from a Common Market to the "European Economic Community", from the European Economic Community to the European Communities, and from the European Communities to the EU. Today the union consists of 27 countries, covering much of the European mainland, Ireland, and Cyprus. (The European Union, 2021). The European integration process has throughout these changes gradually developed from a rational by-product of economic prosperity and legal harmonisation, to a stage with integration as a cultural process, and culture evolving to a political instrument for furthering that construction process (Shore, 2000).

During Britain's membership of the European Union, it mostly perceived integration as a largely technical and economic issue of little cultural importance, EU officials on the other hand have since 1970s envisioned a "European consciousness" and "European culture" among the peoples of Europe. Jean Monnet, one of the Community's founding fathers declared *"We are not forming coalitions between States, but union among peoples".* (Shore, 2000). Integration has not simply been about the elimination of barriers to trade or the free movement of capital, goods, and labour, but rather a humanistic enterprise involving a "coming together" among peoples of different national cultures (Shore, 2000).

The EUs goal towards an "ever closing union" involves cultural integration European elites often have described as Europe's "federal destiny", however its success was not guaranteed (Shore, 2000, p. 21). It was the Treaty of Rome who first described the "ever closer union, which largely depended on the EU's ability to create a new sense of *Europeanness*, in other words a collective identity that aims to eradicate nationalistic loyalties and bigotry. This goal also depended on the

EU's ability to lay the foundation for a higher level of consciousness based on allegiance to European institutions and ideals (Shore, 2000, p. 21). However, the term *European identity* wouldn't be mentioned until two decades later.

December 1973, the nine member countries of the European Communities decided to draw up a document defining the *European Identity*, leading to a clearer path on how to achieve an European identity, namely reviewing the common heritage, interests and special obligations of the Nine; assessing the level of unity so far achieved among them; and reappraising the dynamic nature of European unification (The University of Luxembourg's CVCE.eu, 2013). Something about European identity important for further integration

However, despite five decades of institutional attempts to foster a "European identity", the "peoples" of Europe have yet to embrace the "European idea" in the ways at least Jean Monnet envisioned.

Numerous initiatives have been launched to foster said identity, from smaller initiatives such as the European flag "the emblem of European unification", the standardised European passport, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as the "anthem of European unification", to uniting the Union under a single monetary union under once currency and establishing a "European citizenship". In order to determine whether the Declaration on European Identity has been successful in fostering a European identity, ones must investigate and determine what an "identity" means in a European integration context, as well as theorise an EU initiative aimed to foster and strengthen the European identity. The research question of this thesis will therefore be: Is a European identity important for further integration. In order to explore the importance of the European identity and its potential effects this thesis will also be exploring initiatives launched by the EU to strengthen the European identity and discuss their effects on the European identity and integration.

2. Methodology

The thesis is a descriptive analysis of the European identity, with a particular focus on young Europeans who have participated in the Erasmus exchange programme, The goal is to determine

– if possible – whether the Erasmus program has contributed towards a stronger European identity and thus laid foundations for further future European integration

In order to discuss and determine the importance of a European identity in a European integration context, I will first look at different ways to conceptualise European identity. I will be using three different categories presented by Laura Cram in their analysis *"Does the EU need a Navel? Implicit and Explicit Identification with the European Union*"* (Cram, 2012). This is important to understand what exactly a European identity is and how individuals are able to self-identify as European, or refuse such identity. Secondly, I will attempt to distinct *who* the Europeans scholars have been trying to identify and study, what the differences between them are, and who are *not* Europeans in this context. This is to not confused potential different types of *Europeans* and separate them from those who are *not* European.

After presenting a definition of identity that fits a European context and who Europeans are, I will present initiatives launched by the European Community and European Union with the goal of fostering a European identity and further European integration, while describing their importance for the European integration process.

To properly explore the questions, I am asking and find their answers, I will narrow down my thesis down to *young Europeans* specially students who decide to participate in the Erasmus exchange programme and those who decide to study in their home state. As critics stated that a European identity cannot or is hard to co-exist along with national identities, I will explore and discuss why some believe these two sets of identities cannot exists and evaluate whether their scepticism is valid or has been disproven/ legitimately challenged.

In the last part of the discussion, I will attempt to present the EC/EUs goals and ambitions with the Erasmus programme and present evidence by scholars of a European identity being fostered by the Erasmus exchange programme. This topic is still widely disputed among scholars, as some believe the program is intended to foster a European identity, while others believe that goal has long been abandoned by the EU in favour of more economic factors, and that even if Erasmus contributed towards an increase European identity, it was being targeted at the wrong group of people from the very beginning.

3. Theory

3.1 What is a European identity?

Identifying and defining an abstract concept such as "identity" can be challenging, furthermore it might even be impossible to agree on a definitive definition. Personal identity can be rooted in individuals experience primarily in the convictions adopted passively or actively in reflection by a self-identical subject in the light of their social and traditional inheritances (Drummond, 2021, p. 235). Secondly, a person's identity also is rooted in other individual's characterisations of that person in light of the social conventions and constructs of the culture and traditions that have shaped their personal identity. Personal identity is in this context, rooted in beliefs, traits, sentiments, and moods. (Drummond, 2021, p. 235). Using this theory, it is natural for individuals to define their personal identity with the nation(s) they are citizens in, along with its cultures, social norms, tradition, and history. However, in a European context, it is hard to use this self-identification theory to define people in a continent with many different countries, cultures, social norms, tradition, and history.

In order to understand identity in a European integration context, I will mainly be using three key categories presented by Laura Cram:

      i.   The self-allocated label or role – "I am European"
     ii.   The state of being – "I am more or less intensively attached to the EU and/or its outputs"
   iii.   The political behaviour – "I am a supporter of the EU, it's policies and/or European integration

The first category supports the "self-labelling" individuals perform to identify themselves presented by Drummond. However, Cram argues that this self-categorisation of the individual does not tell anything about the meaning or intensity of that categorisation to the individual (Cram, 2012, p. 72). For example, while it is possible for a Norwegian to identify solely as Norwegian without feeling particularly patriotic or believe that their nationality is important to one's self concept (Cram, 2012, p. 72). Meaning that identification as a European does not necessarily mean identification with the EU, or support for its policies. Yet does not mean that a

European identity is not effective towards further European integration. If an individual does not identify themselves with the EU, they can still have an unconscious attachment to EU, in other words an implicit attachment. This implicit attachment may be transformed in to a conscious or explicit attachment in the future, as the EU becomes a more meaningful presence for its citizens. (Cram, 2012, pp. 73, 83).

3.2 Who are "The Europeans"

Creating a European has as previously stated been a work in progress for many decades now, therefore it is valid to ask, "are there any Europeans?" and if so, "who are they". Neil Fligstein describes Europeans as high socio-economic citizens, such as businessmen, professionals and other white-collar workers that work across several European countries (Fligstein, Polyakova, & Sandholtz, 2012, p. 109). They argue that these individuals have developed a higher European feeling due to their long-term social relationships with their counterparts or colleagues in other European countries, they speak second or third languages for work, and have managed to create a Europe-wide business and professional associations in which gathers people to discuss matters of mutual interests. (Fligstein, Polyakova, & Sandholtz, 2012, pp. 109-110). Another group that is more likely to feel European are young people who travel across border for education, tourism and jobs. If they are educated, they are more likely to interact with other educated Europeans who share professions or common interests with them, such as social or cultural activities (Fligstein, Polyakova, & Sandholtz, 2012, p. 110). Lastly, people with higher income will be able to travel more often and experience the diverse cultural life of Europe.

In short, people (especially younger) with high economic or social background are more likely to participate in European-wide economic, social, and political arenas. In comparison, if these are the people who are able to participate in cross border activities and interactions, then blue-collar workers and people from lower economic and social backgrounds will not have the same prospects to do the same (Fligstein, Polyakova, & Sandholtz, 2012, p. 110). Older people may be less adventurous and be less likely to know other languages that let them connect with other Europeans, they might still feel distanced from the dividing lines of the cold war, thus be less willing to associate with people from neighbouring countries. Older people tend also hold more conservative political views and have a stronger sense of value for their own nation and be less inclined to interact with people who "are not like them". (Fligstein, Polyakova, & Sandholtz, 2012, p. 110).

4. Discussion

4.1 Laying the foundation of a European identity

In the past two decades we have seen a surge of populistic rhetoric that have promoted and boosted trends towards European disintegration shifted the focus on the importance of individual nations. This discord among Europeans increased once again the demand for a shared European identity in order to get the European integration project back on track (Luhmann, 2017, p. 1360). However, it is important to ask oneself the question, has the European integration project so far managed to foster a European identity.

The Declaration of European Identity in 1973 was originally intended to define the international position of the European Community (EC) and its responsibilities towards the rest of the world. This line however was quickly shifted over to a more active promotion of a European cultural identity with the 1976 Tindemans Report proposing establishing a community of citizens by actively raising the European awareness through visible symbols: standard passports, common social security systems, and mutual academic exchanges (Tekiner, 2020, p. 3). This is arguably the foundation for the implicit attachment to the EU as discussed in the theory section of this thesis as systems created by the EC start directly affecting its citizens daily lives. To further strengthen this strategy of identity building, the EU introduced in the early-2000s a set of common European symbols associated with traditional nation-states with the intent of reshaping the European identity in a cultural sense. Among those symbols were the European flag, the EC/EU anthem Beethoven's Ode to Joy, a Europe-wide celebration of the European project (Europe Day on May 9th). However, one of the biggest symbols and policy to change European citizen's lives was the introduction of the European passport along with the Schengen Agreement finally coming in to force (Tekiner, 2020, pp. 3-4).

These symbols were introduced with great ambition and high expectations, they were after all the symbols that would create a common European culture among all Europeans, however, it is still disputed whether these symbols contributed towards a stronger European feeling among its citizens, if they are even acknowledged by the average European citizen, or if they even enough to foster a European identity. Jeffrey Checkel argues that most of the European symbols have

remained weak or ambiguous compared to national symbols, and that only the European flag, the Erasmus program and the EU currency (the euro) have fully succeeded. (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009, p. 206). Furthermore, the lack of a common European history (at least that is yet to be written), Independence Day, and other cultural and historical sentiments that typically form a sense of national unity are completely absent from the EU. Lastly, he argues that a strong national identification to their country is the main reason for a weak identification with Europe, exemplifying weak British identification with Europe (this was prior to Brexit) (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009, p. 207).

Whether these attempts at establishing common cultural European symbols have failed or succeeded may still be too early to call considering they were only introduced a couple of decades ago. It is not surprising that national identities that have been established for hundreds of years are stronger symbols than ones created in very recent history. Nevertheless, this is a topic worth exploring in future research.

4.2 Co-existing with national identities.

Whether a European identity can co-exist has been questioned by several scholars. In contrast to Checkel's argument that a strong national identification results in a weak European identification, Risse shows that analyses from survey data and social psychological experiments confirm that people who strongly identify with their nation-state can still feel a sense of belonging to Europe (Risse, 2010, p. 40). According to two thirds of the respondents from a 2004 Eurobarometer, more than two thirds felt some attachment to Europe, and more than 70 percent were proud to be European, however very few people exclusively identified as European or prioritised Europe over their nation state. 40 to 50 percent felt attached to their nation-state, then to Europe, which can be described as "identity lite" (Risse, 2010, p. 40). However, the amount of "Europeanness" felt varied enormously among member states, a large majority of citizens in Luxembourg, Italy, France, Spain, and Germany overwhelmingly described themselves as Europeans, while the majority of citizens in countries such as Great Britain, Finland, Sweden, Greece, and Austria identified with their nation state only (Risse, 2010, pp. 41-42). It is worth noticing that none of these countries belonged to the original six EU member states.

To summarise, Checkel is right about most citizens of Europe primarily identifying with the nation-state, however, this does not deny the possibility of feeling European as well, making room to continue fostering a European identity while keeping your national identity.

4.3 Strengthening and investing in the European identity

With the integration of the Schengen Agreement, further geographical enlargement of the EU, and the introduction of a single currency, over the past 10 years integration has continued to deepened and gained salience in the lives of many citizens. As the free movement of the treaties are realised, individuals are increasingly getting a closer relationship to the EU in their everyday life (Luhmann, 2017, p. 1361). The Schengen Agreement combined with the Eastern Enlargement created a great opportunity of expansion for the student mobility programme Erasmus, it's users and further European integration and identity fostering. A 2007 report from the European Commission stated that increased mobility of students within the European Union may be crucial to develop Europe's highly skilled labour force in order to strengthen its position as a knowledge-based economy (Gonzalez, Mesanza , & Mariel, 2011, p. 414). Scholars have also detected that not only does student mobility benefit the European Union and its economy, but also its users: it helps improve international competences, enabling former students to be placed in international positions, and increase the probability of a person working abroad later in life (Gonzalez, Mesanza , & Mariel, 2011, p. 414). This corresponds with Fligstein's (2012) definition on "who are the Europeans", thus it is possible to argue that student mobility creates more cross-border European arenas for European to interact, strengthening their implicit relation and sentiment towards the EU. Gonzales argues himself that this economic discourse regarding the benefits of student mobility also includes an overlapping socio-cultural discourse about European integration and shared European cultural values (Gonzalez, Mesanza , & Mariel, 2011, p. 414).

For this reason, the European Commission has financed the Erasmus programme in order to help European students who otherwise would have stayed in their home country for the entirety of their studies to complete parts or the entirety of their education abroad (Wilson, 2011, pp. 1113-1114). As a acknowledged by Checkel (2009), Erasmus has become one of the most high-

visibility EU programmes and has become iconic for Euro-enthusiasts to use the term "Erasmus generation" to describe young Europeans (Luhmann, 2017, p. 1114). The Erasmus programme is also seen as a hope to produce a more "European youth" that over time will be more supportive of the European integration process than the older generations who still believe in the differences between nations from World War 2 and the Cold War (Luhmann, 2017, p. 1114).

However not all scholars are completely sold by the Erasmus programme and its alleged effects on European youth, integration, and identity. Theresa Kuhn argues that the Erasmus Programme already misses it mark by addressing university students who are already very likely to feel European, ultimately not contributing to a larger European youth (Kuhn, 2012, p. 994). Kuhn focuses as well on Cram's (2012) notes on self-categorisation (it tells nothing about the meaning or intensity of the individual's identity) and problematises even further. Kuhn argues that the European Identity can be artificially constructed by creating surveys on European identity that ordinary people would not normally relate to, unless explicitly asked (Kuhn, 2012, p. 996), thus the focus on Erasmus as a European identity building tool is possibly overrated. Instead, Kuhn argues that in order to best identify European identity, insights from experiments must be combined with qualitative interviews and anthropological research, and that broader patterns of identity change ultimately cannot be detected in small-n studies (Kuhn, 2012, p. 996).

Kuhn does acknowledge to some extent that the Erasmus program was an important European identity building policy in its infancy, but that it no longer serves that goal. Instead, she argues that European education policy-makers started to recognise education as an economic commodity to be used to further foster Europeans' employability abroad and to advance the EU as a knowledge-based society (Kuhn, 2012, p. 997). She also acknowledges the Erasmus program as the Commission's flagship, but mainly for economic reasons while integration and identity building come as a later priority. She challenges the Erasmus programme effect further building a European identity by looking at a survey who interviewed two different samples of students: a group of British students going abroad and European students going to the United Kingdom, with a control group of British students studying at home. The analysis showed that the Erasmus exchange programme did not strengthen the participants' support for the EU over time. The ones who stayed at home who experienced an increased interaction with visiting Europeans, did not strengthen the participants' sense of European identity either (Kuhn, 2012, p.

998). Similar results can be found from a panel study comparing British, French, and Swedish Erasmus students to sedentary university students. The study analysed their attachment to Europe, European self-identification, prosperity to vote for a pro- or anti-European candidate in an election, and their position towards further European integration. While the study found Erasmus students to be considerably more positive to the European project than the students who studied at home, it argues that this difference existed even before the students decided to study abroad or not (Kuhn, 2012, p. 998). In short, Kuhn argues that even if the Erasmus projects' ultimate goal still were to continue fostering a European identity and further European integration, the program is targeted towards the wrong crowd, as the students who decide to study abroad, already has pro-European sentiments, thus not "creating" more pro-European citizens for the future. (Kuhn, 2012, pp. 994-998).

Kuhns work has however been challenged as well in recent years, as there is still discord among scholars on whether Erasmus student mobility fosters European identity and integration. Kristine Mitchell reviewed in 2015 Kuhn's (2012) findings, hypothesising that participation in an Erasmus exchange fosters European identity (Mitchell, 2015, p. 334). Mitchell's findings outline that there is a considerable variation across Erasmus participants when her samples are broken down by nationality and host country. She states that while Kuhn is correct on students are already likely to identify as European and will get little or no effect of an exchange, the minority of students who do not identify as European appear to experience a real effect from participating in an Erasmus exchange (Mitchell, 2015, p. 339). Among the students who did *never* thought of themselves as Europeans prior to the analysis, three quarters of Erasmus students started identifying as European, proving that the Erasmus exchange does make a considerable impact on those who still do not feel European (Mitchell, 2015, p. 339). This however did not apply equally to students of any nationality. British students appeared to be three times more likely than other nationalities to begin the study thinking themselves in exclusively national terms, however there was only a 15 percent reduction of this number over the course of the Erasmus exchange, compared to a 51 to 76 percent reduction in other nationalities. To summarise, an Erasmus exchanged proved in this study to be less effective on British students in contrast to other European nationalities. Surprisingly, Europeans who studied abroad *in* Britain is associated with a greater reduction of exclusive national identifiers than studying in another European country. Mitchell shows that there was a reduction of exclusive national identification greater than 80%

for Europeans who studied abroad in Britain, compared to 50 percent for Europeans who went to Spain, Italy, or France. (Kuhn, 2012, pp. 340-341).

While Kuhn (2012) made valid remarks on the possible lacking effects of the Erasmus exchange programme and its ability to create more *Europeanness* among participating students, Mitchell (2015) managed to shed a new light on this topic and show that the Erasmus exchange programme does change the level on which students self-identify as European or not.

4.4 A growing populistic anti-integration Europe

Even though the European project recognised the need of a European identity as early as the Treaty of Rome, the need for a common European identity has never been larger than before. In later years the EU has experienced a legitimacy crisis with the failure of its institutions of establishing a trust from the electorate. In addition to this, it has not been able to purposively channel debate and dissent inside the Union in constructive ways, giving fuel to the destructive excess that has characterised populist movements in Europe which ended up being a significant contributor to the Brexit vote (Martill & Staiger, 2018, p. 30). As long as an increasing number of European citizens and policy-makers consider Brussels as a threat to their constitutional, political, or cultural identity, the EU will remain in murky water (Martill & Staiger, 2018, p. 105).

5. Concluding remarks

It is possible to argue that the treaty of Rome succeeded in one thing, namely creating a *new sense of Europeanness*, however, it is not possible to say the same for the *collective identity* or the eradication of nationalistic loyalties. In this case it is easy to agree with the critics of the visible European culture symbols established in the early 2000s (the European flag, drivers license, Europe day, a "national" anthem) who believe these have had little to no effect on fostering a common European culture or identity.

Several scholars still acknowledged Cram's (2012) three key categories of self-identification, and while they disagree on the level of European identity achieved within the union, they agree that the self-allocated label "I am European" does not mean you are loyal to the EU and it's ideals and institutions, or ever agree with it's policies and integration process. As it is not

widespread phenomenon to support the EUs policies as a result of self-identifying as a European, I was unfortunately unable to determine whether a European identity us effective towards further European integration. This however does not mean it is impossible for it to occur sometimes I the future. An individual who identifies as European but does not identify with the EU, can still have an unconscious attachment towards the EU, namely an *implicit attachment*. If the EU continues to play a stronger, positive and more visible part in their citizens everyday life, an implicit attachment may continue to grow among its citizens, and in time transform in to a conscious or explicit attachment in the future. This makes the research and studying of the Erasmus generation relevant as today's young and educated citizens of Europe, start to replace today's older more nationalistic population. On the other hand, it will be interesting to see if the blue-collar workers/people from lower economic and social backgrounds who do not interact as much with other European nationalities or travel the continent, will inherit the nationalistic skepticism of today's older generation If they do, will they continue to hold on to their nationalistic identity that some scholars argue impede the emergence of a common European identity, or will there be a spillover among young people that gradually replaces nationalistic tendencies with more cross-border curiosity for their European counter parts. In any case, the current tendency shows that while Europeans might increasingly start identifying as European, this European identity will not replace the national-state identities anytime soon.

While the Erasmus program is considering successful by scholars, it's success towards contributing towards an increased European identity among young people is still widely debated. As some argue that it does contribute towards this identity and others claim it does not at all, I believe there is a middle ground to it. Mitchell states that the Erasmus program does contribute towards a stronger European identity among students who prior to the exchange did not feel European at all. However, if they already feel European, or feel very strong identification to their national-state, the effects of the program might be minimal as it was to already Europeanized students or British students.

As populistic nationalistic tendencies continue to grow in the EU, the positive identity effects of the Erasmus program will doubtfully be enough to turn the tide for the EU and relaunch the European integration process.

Finally, to answer my initial question *is a European identity important for further integration,* in order to create the ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe and eradicate nationalistic loyalties and bigotry, the future peoples of Europe need to identify and feel more European than today's adult and older generation. If the EU continues to grow and create implicit identification among its citizens with the European Union, it might foster future explicit identification with the EU, strengthening support for further integration. It is also important to keep building on common European values, culture and identity to counter the growing nationalistic tendencies fueled by skepticism towards the EUs institutions and Brussels.

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