The thematic issue is supported by the Jean Monnet Chair titled Cultural Political Economy of Europe 2030 and its Global Impact (CPE2030), edited by prof. dr. Borut Roncevic.

The project was Co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, project number 620793-EPP-1-2020-1-SI-EPPJMO-CHAIR.

Original Article • DOI: 10.2478/rsc-2023-0009 • RSC • 15(1) • 2023 • 112-117

RSC

Research in Social Change

EUROPEAN IDENTITY AND THE GLOBAL RELEVANCE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract

The article discusses the relationship between the strength of European identity and the 'weight' of the European Union in international relations. The author claims that without a firm identity, which derives from a common cultural heritage and rests on common values, the Union cannot become as strong a global player as it could be expected from its economic strength and human capital. It has to be stated that this heritage is strongly heterogeneous as it is based on both the Judeo-Christian religious tradition and the tradition of Enlightenment rationalism. Europe is made up of different ethnic and religious communities, each with its own identity, which cannot be merged into a single cultural category that would transcend the differences between these communities. European identity can only be built on recognising and respecting individual and collective differences. However, it must also require that certain core values are respected. These values are the basis of norms and principles, and individuals and groups act according to them.

Keywords

European identity • values • heritage • global player • European Union

1. Introduction

The development of events that we have witnessed in recent years has brought Europe to a position where its political and existential future is called into question. The financial crisis that broke out in 2008 was merely an overture, which indicated serious dysfunctions in the functioning of the European Union (EU) as the central institutional link of the countries of the 'old continent'. The migrant crisis, which we are witnessing and the escalation of which is expected of us, has exposed the limitations of the EU. The 2022 Russian aggression on Ukraine was supported to a considerable extent by the fact that the regime of President Putin perceived the EU as weak and as such not capable of giving an efficient response. The unwillingness and inability of both the European institutions and the central countries of this association seriously threatened not only its political future, that is, the further deepening of integration processes, but the existence of Europe as we know it and as it was the goal of those who sought to open a new chapter in the relations between European countries and nations after the Second World War. It is a Europe based on freedom, democracy and respect for fundamental human rights; a Europe that will be freed from totalitarian tendencies to subjugate individuals to various collectivist utopias.

The EU represents a special case among supra-national associations since it aims to transcend mere economic or other specific forms of integration. Instead, it seeks to establish a common political system that regulates the most important areas of life in terms of setting basic rules and standards. In general, we are speaking about a political entity that lies between a confederation and a federation in terms of the level of integration (see, e.g., Siedentop 2000). However, the developmental trajectory of the Union's political setting is still uncertain.

The present article discusses the relationship between the strength of European identity and the 'weight' of the EU in international relations. The future of its integration will determine the future of its values since these largely depend not only on its ability to resolve economic problems but also on the strength of its 'glue'. By this we mean the common European identity which is embodied in self-consciousness and a feeling of one's own uniqueness (which is, necessarily, connected with a sense of difference in relation to 'others'). This awareness is the basis for loyalty and solidarity within a particular social entity. It can be stated that without a firm identity that derives from a common cultural heritage and rests on common values, the Union cannot become as

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strong a global player as could be expected from its economic strength and human capital.

2. Europe as a Cultural Category

The process of institutional integration at the European level was, for decades, dominated by a neo-functionalist approach (Sanders et al. 2012), based on technocratic and non-political problem-solving (Rosemond 2000). This approach was derived from the implicit assumption that if the economy prospers, that is, as the well-being of the people grows, other matters will get resolved almost automatically, so to speak. The cultural aspects of integration were neglected as they were considered irrelevant. However, with the strengthening of political integration, it gradually became clear that Europe as a political community could not function without a platform of common values. Europe needs to become a political body that has a common identity and shares a common feeling of belonging.

This raises the question of the essence of European culture. The problem is that those characteristics that are the result of European cultural development are mostly shared by the entire Western civilisation. In his famous and distinctly controversial study on the 'clash of civilisations', Huntington (1996) classified Europe (not the whole of it but, nevertheless, most of what is now the EU) as part of the Western civilisation as both have common cultural foundations. According to him, the key features of Western civilisation are a classical heritage (Greek philosophy, Roman law), Catholicism and Protestantism as a common religious background (which provides a feeling of collective belonging as well as common moral guidelines), social and political pluralism (social differentiation and the autonomy of different groups), representation (various autonomous institutions that represent social interests), the rule of law (the central role of the law), the separation of the secular and spiritual authority and individualism as the basic orientation for values. Although these properties do not exist only in the context of Western civilisation, their coexistence and interconnectedness are typical of how the West differs from other civilisations. This means that the two categories, that is, 'Europe' and 'the West', are not easy to separate. The European culture is the one that represents the spiritual basis for the emergence of modern Western society, with parliamentary democracy and a market economy as its main institutional components.[1]

In addition, the European spiritual heritage is highly diversified. European culture is based as much on faith as on reason, that is, on the Judeo-Christian religious tradition as well as the tradition of Enlightenment rationalism. As stated by Brague (2003) in his book with the indicative title *Europe, the Roman Road*, in cultural terms Europe is the true successor of Roman civilisation as it has taken over the capacity to absorb achievements from other cultures and integrate them into its own framework. In this context, it is characterised by greater openness to the 'outside world' than is the case with other civilisations. However, when we talk about European cultural specifics and their legacy, it is necessary to be aware that these not only include freedom and democracy but also ideological exclusivism and imperialist expansionism (Mazower 1998). The totalitarianisms of the 20th century, both Nazi–Fascist and Communist grew on European soil and were dangerous rivals to a democratic system. Although democracy prevailed in the end, the experience of the two totalitarianism demonstrates that the development of democracy cannot be taken for granted but must be something that citizens constantly and actively strive for.

3. The Foundations of European Institutional Setting

Every political setting needs cultural foundations if it wants to survive and develop in the long term. The legitimacy rests on these foundations, as 'the capacity to produce and maintain a belief that political institutions, or forms, are the most appropriate for the society' (Lipset Seymour 1959, 29). This legitimacy results in the acceptance of the citizenry of the fundamental norms and principles of a particular political system and compliance with them. This also holds for democracy. In this context, it refers to an agreement on the fundamental values that are the basis for the creation of a legislative framework within which democratic political life takes place. These are values such as freedom, respect for human personality and tolerance, self-confidence and the ability to stand up for one's rights.

The legitimacy of the democratic system thus presupposes a consensus in terms of the commitment of the citizen body to key democratic norms and principles, as well as recognition of this type of institutional setting as the only acceptable political option (Tomšič 2002). For a democracy to function successfully, a common identity for the political community, that is, awareness of their common origin, is necessary.

Modern democracy was developed in the context of the nation-state, where national identity forms the common integrative framework for the citizenry. Analogous to this, democracy at

[1] Huntington's approach was heavily criticised by many authors. They attributed it to cultural determinism and reductionism in terms of the simplification of certain cultural phenomena (especially the nature of Islam) (see, e.g., Ali 2002 or Said 2001). Although he sometimes neglects – or at least downplays the importance of – intercultural diversities, he convincingly shows the relevance of different cultural traditions for political relations and dynamics.

the level of the EU, therefore, needs some kind of European identity. There are many critiques of the 'democratic deficit' in European political life (see Haller 2008). They usually refer to the underdeveloped participatory component at the EU level, since the citizens lack opportunities to take part in the decision-making process. These accusations are justified to some extent. However, it is necessary to be aware of the specifics of the European political agenda. The democratic model that is in place at the level of the nation-state cannot be mechanically transformed to the Union level as such. For European participatory democracy to happen, there needs to exist what Weiler (2002) calls a 'European *demos*', that is, a European body of citizens (civil society and the public) with strong common feelings of belonging. Currently, national identity is still the dominant form of identification for the citizens of European countries, although this does not necessarily exclude pro-European feelings.

This brings us to the question of the essence of European identity. Pluralism, one of the central features of the European cultural tradition is the main reason for the lack of consensus on the common underlying features that would serve to provide an identity for the European people. This was very clearly manifested in the dilemma of whether or not to mention the role of Christianity in the preamble of the European Constitution. The positions of the EU's member countries varied widely on this issue (they accepted a compromise that stated the importance of Europe's religious heritage). Europe is made up of various ethnic and religious communities with their own identities which cannot be merged into a single cultural category (e.g., through the mechanism of the 'melting pot' as in the formation of the American nation). The creation of some kind of 'European nation' would be a utopia – at least in the short-term perspective. The vast majority of Europeans still feel a much stronger attachment to their own nations than to Europe as a whole. European unity and solidarity should thus be based solely on respect for individual and collective differences. Hence, an ongoing dialogue between the representatives of culturally diverse entities, established on an equal basis, would be required for the European institutional setting to achieve 'unity in diversity'.

The issue that is raised relates to the importance of a common institutional framework for the countries that have already succeeded in becoming a member of the EU, in particular in terms of whether it can perform the role of strengthening the quality of governance. The mechanisms associated with a gradual process largely lost their importance. Recently, in many European countries, we have been witnessing a deterioration in the quality of governance (Tomšič and Vehovar 2012). This is reflected in violation of the rule of law, financial instability, corruption, clientelism, etc. Obviously, the EU actually does pose effective mechanisms to ensure compliance with common European rules.

4. European Identity Put on the Test

Protests in different parts of the Union that have been taking place for decades are manifestations of the increased discontent of the citizens (or at least some social groups) with the current socio-economic and political situation. In this century, different crises followed one after the other in Europe (and the world). In 2008, the global financial and economic crisis broke out, which severely affected some European countries (mainly Greece). This was followed in 2015 by the migrant crisis, which saw more than a million people from the Third World (mostly from Muslim countries) arrive in Europe, most of them by forced means. In 2020, the pandemic of the Covid-19 virus broke out, which extensively changed the lives of Europeans for a couple of years as well as people in other parts of the world. Just when the epidemic crisis began to subside, something that seemed unimaginable happened in 2022. We have in mind, of course, a large-scale war in Europe, which followed the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The outbreaks of the crises and the difficulties at the national and European levels in dealing with them only strengthened this potential conflict. Many measures, taken by European governments, especially in most crisis-affected countries (aimed to either stabilise public finances, settle large numbers of migrants or bring, or limit the spread of epidemics) brought, at least in the short term, the deterioration of the standard of living of many citizens. This led to the escalation of social conflict and thus political destabilisation both at the level of member-states and at the level of the EU as a whole.

The crisis can hardly be seen as a favourable environment for strengthening a common European identity. On the contrary, it creates favourable conditions for the rise of populist and authoritarian tendencies. Protagonists of such tendencies are usually very anti-European oriented. Both share the reluctance and even open rejection of the fundamental European principles of freedom, openness and tolerance.

The capability of the Union to set up efficient institutional mechanisms depends not only on the well-being of its citizens but also on the perspective of further deepening the ties between Europeans and their feelings of common belonging. Supervisory and regulatory mechanisms have to be designed in a way that is capable of ensuring (and even enforcing, if necessary) the respect of the 'rules of the game' that are in place in the Union – the rules that derive from its fundamental values. Special efforts have to be made to improve the functioning of the judiciary and other institutions according to the rule of law. There should be effective monitoring of these institutions'

conduct at the member-state level. Especially in some new EU members from East-Central Europe, the judiciary and other elements of the state apparatus are still under the strong influence of the people from the former communist regime whose mentality presents a significant obstacle for them to perform the role of protection of human rights and liberties. Furthermore, there is evidence of severe violations of these rights that happen even at the highest levels of judicial structure (Tomšič 2017).[2] Assistance must be provided to the former communist countries for dismantling the existing 'old' regime's structures and corresponding informal centres of power.

A particularly strong challenge to the European institutional setting as well as to its underlying values and principles was posed by the 2015 migrant crisis. It turned out that the Union had no scenario of how to effectively deal with the great mass of people from its nearer and more distant surroundings who wished to settle within its borders. Integration of migrants, particularly those from Muslim countries, mostly failed as reflected in numerous social problems such as low education and high level of unemployment in these communities, high crime rates and rising religious extremism among the migrant population. The latter represents a serious threat to the security and stability of European society. Series of terrorist acts in different European cities (Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Stockholm, Vienna …) from 2015 onwards were not only murderous attacks on the lives of inhabitants and visitors of these cities but also assaults on the most fundamental European values and the way of European life. They were assaults on freedom, openness, tolerance and *joie de vivre* – the very values that represent the complete negation of *forma mentis* of (not only) Islamist fanatics. These criminal acts completely dispelled the idea of multiculturalism. The fallacy of this ideology is in its denial of the relevance of cultural differences and their impact on the functioning of society. It denies that the system that is developed in Europe, with parliamentary democracy, a market economy, human rights and other elements rests on a specific cultural foundation. And, denies that certain traditions are simply incompatible with European norms and principles.

5. EU as a Global Player

We can often find assessments that claim the 'weight' of the EU in international relations has been considerably reduced in the last year. This means that its influence on international events is decreasing, compared to other global power centres – not only the United States of America, but also China and, in some respects, even Russia. It could be said that its geopolitical power does not correspond to its economic power, intellectual potential and cultural capital. This results in it not even having a decisive role in resolving conflicts in its immediate neighbourhood. This was proven by the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the current war in Ukraine. In both cases, American involvement played a key role. In the first case, it brought an end to the conflicts in Croatia (Operation Storm) and Bosna and Herzegovina (Dayton Agreement) in 1995 and in Kosovo (USA-led NATO intervention) in 1999. In the second case, when Ukraine became the target of Russian aggression, the USA provided crucial military support to Ukrainians to defend themselves.

It is true that the importance of Europe on a global scale has been gradually decreasing since the beginning of the 20th century. First, the economic, political and military centre of the world shifted to the American side of the Atlantic, and later (in the second half of the 20th century and especially in the 21st century) new non-Western power centres appeared. However, one can state that the political weight of the EU significantly lags behind because of the power of its economy and the human or intellectual potential at its disposal. In this sense, we can talk about a considerable disproportion.

Certain systemic shortcomings that are found in the EU can be a part of the reason for this disparity. It is primarily a case of markedly insufficiently developed defence capacities. Most European countries spend less than 2 per cent of their GDP on defence, which is the NATO standard. Therefore, their armies are undernourished both in terms of the number of military personnel and their armament and equipment. Thus, in terms of security, the Union is highly dependent on the protection provided by the US armed forces.

In all of this, it is not just a matter of incorrect strategic assessments by military and intelligence experts and a lack of political will. These misguided priorities result from the disorientation of values and ideas that are shaking European societies. This was caused by currents of ideas, which are the conglomerate of new-age left-wing progressivism. Thus, investing in military capacities is considered something old-fashioned or even 'reactionary'. Rather than strengthening defence capabilities, Europeans are concerned with how many genders there are and which all supposedly endangered minorities need to be protected. Instead of self-confidence, a sense of guilt is imposed on them for the alleged sins of their ancestors. Instead of dealing with external threats, the European institutions sanction those member states of the Union (Poland, Hungary) that are not ready to comply with the progressivist agenda. For this reason, in the eyes of too many Europeans, Russian President Putin is a positive character

[2] One of the most evident examples of such malign practice is the Slovenian 'Partia case' where the former Prime Minister and the leader of the *Slovenian Democratic Party* (the largest centre-rightist party in the country) Janez Janša was sentenced and imprisoned based on bogus accusations of the 'reception of the promise of the bribery' in the public procurement of armour-cars from Finnish manufacturer Patria. The sentence was annulled by the Slovenian Constitutional Court.

who defends traditional values from decadence (although he is an ordinary opportunist who, in terms of values, supports what benefits him now).

An important reason for the relative weakness of the EU lies in its disunity, which is linked to the difficulties in determining what its core values actually are. It is actually hard for Europeans to reach a substantive agreement on this. We often hear references to European values from politicians and opinion leaders. However, there are so many different ideas about what these should be (this ranges from traditional Christian values to values of multiculturalism).

Disagreements over the core values and the basis for common identity are one of the main reasons for problems in defining strategic development goals and their implementation. These goals and directions, which are written in various strategic documents, therefore often remain only at the declarative level.

6. Conclusion

We can say that many shortcomings in the functioning of the institutions of the EU stem from a lack of awareness of what the essence of European identity is. Moreover, certain influential circles (including in politics) cultivate indifference (and in some cases even contempt) for the European cultural heritage. Instead, they impose their particular ideological orientations, which often have nothing to do with this legacy.

However, we can witness promising development in terms of intra-EU relations. Russia's aggression against Ukraine brought about the necessary unity within the EU (and, together with it, of all freedom-loving humanity). Internal differences, disputes and tensions are – more or less – out aside. Finally, the notion prevailed that it is now a matter of defending freedom against oppression, democracy against tyranny and civilisation against barbarism. The Kremlin autocrat can only be stopped by decisive, forceful, united action. In case of victory by Russia, it is clear that Putin would not stop after conquering Ukraine because of his aggressive intentions. He would continue his march of conquest until he was stopped by force.

Europe must remain an open place for all people who want to live in accordance with its values. It must provide aid and assistance to those whose lives are in danger because they come from areas stricken by armed conflict or are victims of persecution by violent autocratic regimes. However, there must be *zero tolerance* towards all those who threaten security and the fundamental values of European society. No one should be allowed – in the name of some kind of some kind of 'intercultural adaptation' – to restrict the freedoms of its citizens to express their opinion and to dress, eat and socialize in their own way. Attempts to introduce rules that oppose European laws are unacceptable and should be sanctioned.

Maintaining the political stability of the EU requires not only improving the institutional effectiveness in terms of capacity for problem-solving, responsiveness and accountability towards the citizenry but also strengthening European identity, that is, a sense of common belonging, based on existing European cultural heritage. Only in this way, this unique political entity can become a significant global agenda-setter.

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