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EDUCATION AND EUROPEAN IDENTITY

How to build the European Identity? Attitudes towards the European Union across its countries

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Abstract: This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the process of European identity formation, using systematic comparisons of national attitudes towards the European Union. The topic of European identity has generated a lively academic debate in the recent decades. The article investigates the patterns of European identity construction and the similarities between national and European identities in terms of articulation and the relationship between the two layers of identity. Are these identities in competition? It is necessary, in order to develop the European identity, national identity to be at least eroded or they can coexist peacefully? The paper will analyze different types of arguments, suggests that European identity can be constructed, and function alongside national identity. The empirical evidence drawn from surveys shows that national identification and European identification are not perceived as contradictory and people feel part of both communities.

Keywords: *National identity, European identity, citizenship*

"We are not bringing together states, we are uniting people" said Jean Monnet in 1952. After more than sixty years since his assertion, raising the feeling of common European identity and involving citizens in the EU public affairs are still great challenges for the European integration process. The formation of a European demos with a collective identity is one of the preconditions to improve the democratic legitimacy issues of the European Union. In the context of subsequent EU enlargement waves and increased cultural diversity, one might ask whether

there is sufficient commonality in the Europeans' perceptions regarding the EU project to substantiate a collective identity.

Described as a*archipelago of diversities* due to ethnic, linguistic (with no less than 24 official languages and about 150 regional and minority languages) and religious pluralism, due to socio-economic, political, demographic and cultural differences (even sometimes discrepancies) between the Member States or even within the same state, the European Union, through its founding documents and the voices of its leaders, counts diversity as one of its riches, as a force for democracy, a stimulus for transformation, creativity and progress and not an obstacle for the European integration.

Acceptance of diversity implies the dialogue between different identities. Identity is a dynamic concept and involves the self-identification of individuals with certain values and symbols. The concept of identity is used with respect to individuals: "…*All identity is individual, but there is no individual identity that is not historical or, in other words, constructed within a field of social values, norms of behavior and collective symbols. The real question is how the dominant reference points of individual identity change over time and with the changing of institutional environment*" (Balibar&Wallerstein, 1991).No form of identity is ever complete, nor totally stable.

A lot of papers in the scientific literature treats the formation of European identity and its relation to national identity. National identity is often seen as *imagined.* Imagined doesn't mean not real. Anderson (1983) defined a nation as a socially constructed community, *imagined* by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. It has an *objective dimension* (territory, mass education, common legal rights and duties) and *asubjective one* (common culture, symbols, myths).The symbols and myths of common past are essential in binding communities together(Smith, 1986). The construction of a nation is a *top to bottom process,* where the nationalist elites select, modify, use and often fabricate such myths of common descent in order to forge a sense of loyalty to national community they claim to represent (Breuilly, 1996)

The building of a European identity is also a top to bottom process, fundamentally elite-driven. The process of its construction is still in progress, but the patterns are similar to those of national identity construction. The process has an*objective dimension* (territory, sets of common legal rights and duties) and a

subjective one (symbols as flag, anthem, a Europe day, a motto, cultural/educational exchange meant to create a sense of solidarity to the EU project, to expose younger generation to patterns of cooperation and to emphasize the unity-in diversity-rather than difference).

Two main types of views have emerged concerning the national-European identities relationship: one claiming that national and European identities are competing, therefore, to develop an European identity, national identity needs to be at least eroded; and another one claiming that the bases of identification with the European community are different from those with the national community, so national and European identities are compatible and they can coexist peacefully.From our point of view, European identity is not in competition with the national identity, it can be constructed and function alongside national identity. People have multiple identities and specific circumstances dictate which identity becomes more important at a particular time.

This thesisis supported by data from Eurobarometer surveys, showing that the two identities are not perceived as contradictory and people feel part of both communities.

The image below (Figure 1) shows the citizens of the Union commitment to their country, to the town where they live and to the European Union. The overwhelming majority of Europeans (91 %) feel attached to their country (51% of them very attached), 88% are attached to their city/town/village and only 46% to the European Union, registering a significant deterioration of this attachment, seven percentage points, compared to spring 2010. Attachment to the European Union is higher in the new Member States (NMS 12-51 %) and decreases in the Eurozone countries and the UK (only 27% of British citizens say they are attached to the European Union).However, the attachment to the European Union is far higher among Europeans who place themselves at the top of the social scale, among managers, self-employed people, among those who never have difficulties in paying bills and among more educated people.

Figure 1: EU attachment
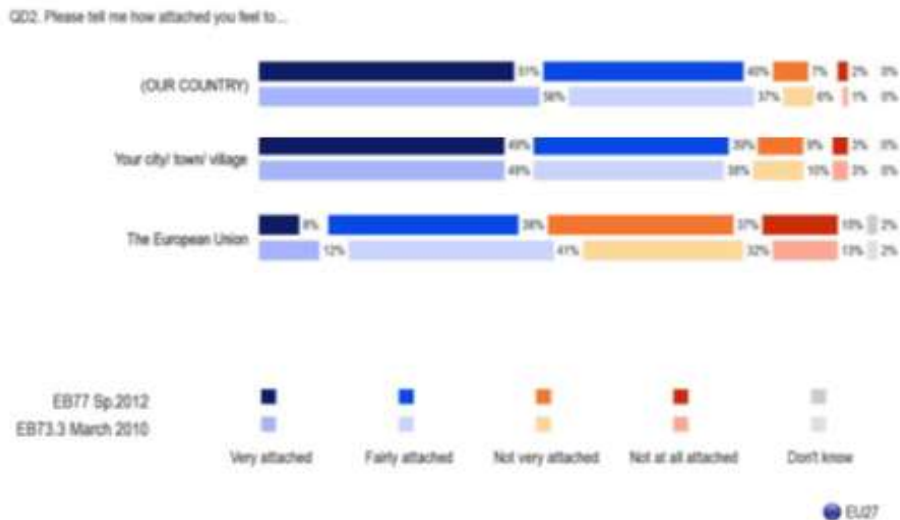
Source: Standard Eurobarometer 77 (Spring 2012)

Decreased attachment to the European Union in 2012 compared to 2010 can be explained by the economic crisis, the context in which national governments are perceived as affecting most people's lives, economic process and standard of living.

This assertion is supported by the answers to another question, regarding the impact on living conditions. Europeans consider that their national public authorities have the most impact on their living conditions (51%), a third of respondents mentioned local/regional level and just 9% mentioned the European Union. The national level seems more predominant (comparing with 2009), while the local and European levels have slipped back.

Figure 2: Impact on living conditions

QD14 In your opinion, which of these different levels of public authorities, European level, national level, regional or local level, has the most impact on your living conditions?

	The European level	The national level	The regional or local level	Don't know
EB 77 Sp.2012	9%	51%	34%	6%
EB 72 Aut.2009	11%	45%	38%	6%
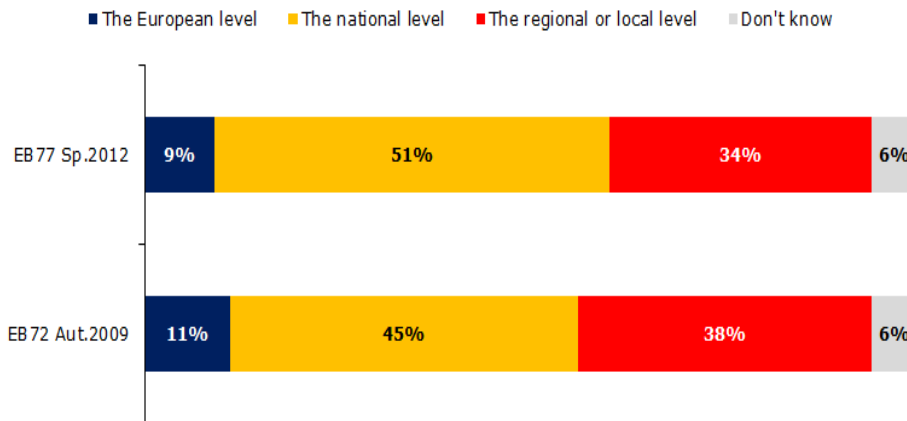
Source: Standard Eurobarometer 77 (Spring 2012)

As concerns the perceived benefits of the adherence to the European Union, peace among the member states and free movement of people, goods and services within the EU are seen as the greatest achievements (Figure 3). The next highest are the euro (28%), the economic power of the European Union (22%) and the student exchange programmes such as Erasmus (21%). Social welfare and common agricultural policy are mentioned by fewer respondents. The respondents from the New Member States 12 appreciate the free movement of people, goods and services (with highest score in Bulgaria- 76%) and peace among the Member States have the highest score in Germany (73%).

We also noticed an increase (comparing with previous Eurobarometer) in the proportion of those who see no benefit of adherence to the European Union: 12% of Europeans spontaneously answered "none" to this question. Again, people that are more educated mentioned the various positive results of the European Union, compared with least educated respondents.

Figure 3: Perceived benefits of the EU

QD8T. Which of the following do you think is the most positive result of the EU? Firstly? And then?
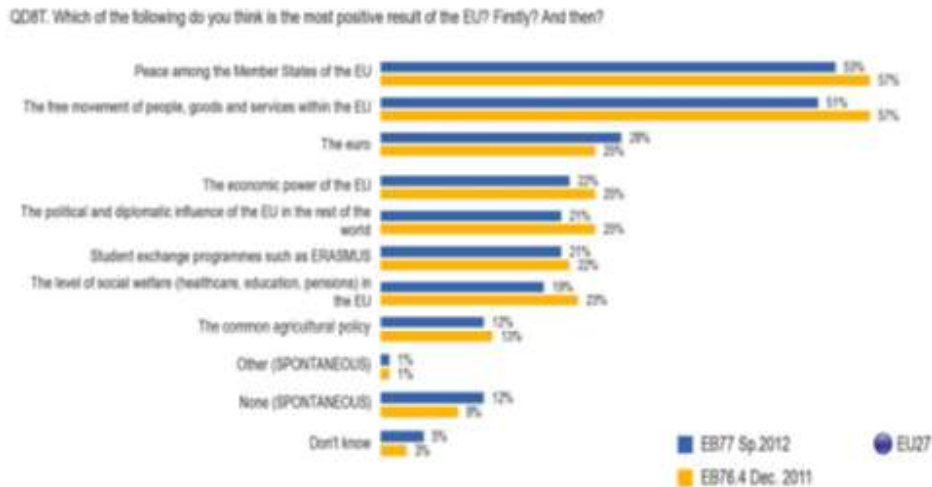
Source: Standard Eurobarometer 77 (Spring 2012)

Europeans feel that they are citizens of the European Union (see Figure 4). More than 60% of them see themselves as citizens of the EU and this feeling is shared by a majority of respondents in almost all Member States. The results are more or less unchanged comparing with previous surveys. The highest scores are in Luxembourg (85%- *total yes*), Denmark (75%) and Germany (74%), and, on the other hand, 57% of the British citizens answered *total no*.

The sense of European citizenship is decreasing with age and is more widespread among the managers, white-collar workers and more educated people.
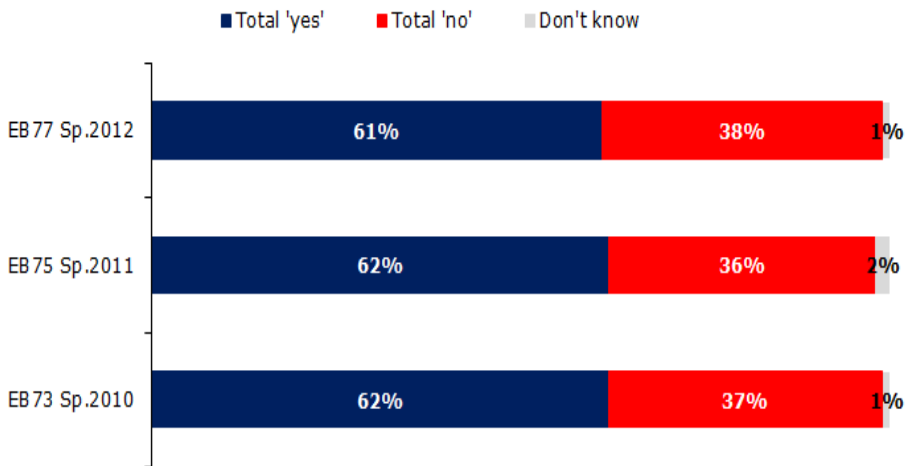
However, almost 40% of Europeans continue to define themselves by their nationality, 49% define themselves by their nationality and as Europeans and only

3% defined themselves as *European only*. The nationality-only option is particularly high in UK (65%).

Figure 4: A sense of European citizenship

QD3.1 For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your own opinion.

You feel you are a citizen of the EU

■ Total 'yes' ■ Total 'no' ■ Don't know

	Total 'yes'	Total 'no'	Don't know
EB 77 Sp.2012	61%	38%	1%
EB 75 Sp.2011	62%	36%	2%
EB 73 Sp.2010	62%	37%	1%

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 77 (Spring 2012)

The main levers mentioned for strengthening the sense of European citizenship are the creation of harmonized EU social welfare system (37%), the possibility to move to another EU country after retirement and to take your pension with you (24%) and the European emergency response service to fight natural disasters (19%). A European Parliament with the right to set taxes is seen as a way of strengthening the feeling of European citizenship by only 12% of respondents and the opportunity to participate in national debates on Europe was mentioned by 10% of respondents, just ahead of the creation of a European army (9%).

Survey data also show that Europeans want to know more about their rights as citizens of the European Union (73% of respondents), in a context where a majority of them (54%) say they know little about these rights. The wish to know more about their rights as European citizens is widespread in both countries where citizens fell that they are ill-informed (such as Romania, France, Italy or Greece) and well-informed countries (as Luxembourg or Estonia).

When asked to identify the most important elements that build the European identity (see Figure 5), Europeans mentioned the euro (41%), just ahead of democratic values (40%), followed by culture and history (both with 26%). The success of the European economy, followed by geography and the European flag are also seen as important elements. Democratic values are perceived to embody the European identity in particular in Denmark (69%), Sweden (64%) and Germany (57%).

Figure 5: European Identity
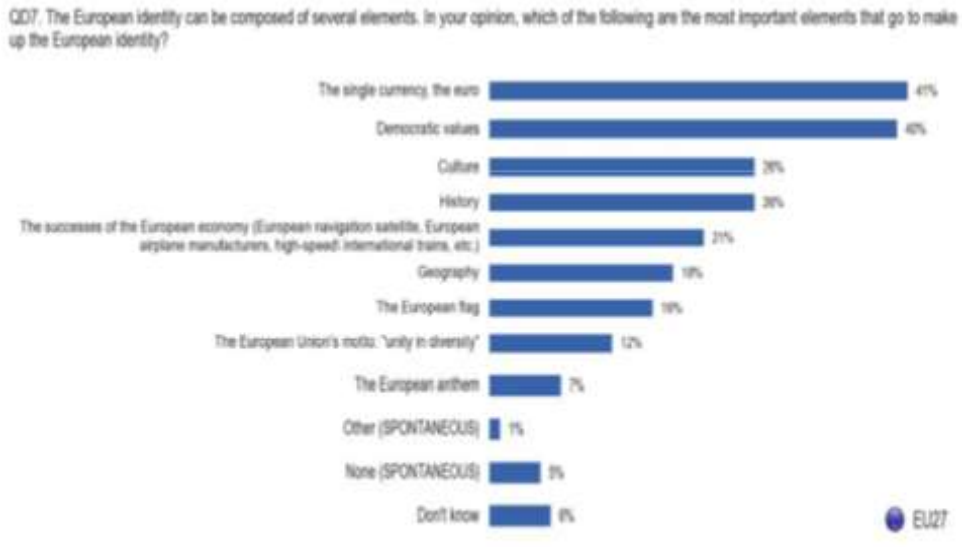
Source: Standard Eurobarometer 77 (Spring 2012)

Therefore, the European identity is embodied firstly by practical components which belong to social welfare and democratic rules and less by symbolic and emotional elements which are underlying the national identity (such as language, ethnicity, religion, common history, myths, symbols, geographic boundaries).

Several conclusions could be drawn from this brief interpretation of survey data. Firstly, the economic crisis seems to erode the EU's image and the solidarity with the European Union. Secondly, the EU system of governance is not part of citizens' daily life, even if the arenas of intervention and political competences of the European Union are constantly increasing. For many European citizens the European Union is still an abstract concept. Thirdly, the positive perceptions and the identification with the EU increase with higher level of education, a higher knowledge of the EU and it tends to decline with the augmentation of the age. Social status seems to determine the perceptions of the EU- citizens from upper classes are always more positive and define themselves as Europeans.

For people to feel European, the European Union institutions have to become more meaningful and inclusive for ordinary citizens. The main challenge for the EU integration project is to invent new ways and materialize in practice a sense of belonging with Europe.

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