**The European Identity Crisis: Nationalism and the EU**

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The European Union, a unique organization that politically and economically integrates its member states, has been under heightened scrutiny in recent years. The concept of European integration existed for centuries before the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, as a theorized solution to war on the continent. In the 20th century, the idea became prominent following the First World War but was never realized. Following the destruction of the Second World War, the organization that would become the European Union was born. In recent decades, the power of the organization has changed and nationalist sentiments in EU member states have increased significantly. This has led to marked increases in what has been coined “Euroscepticism,” which is the opposition to the increasing powers of the European Union or, in some contexts, advocacy for disengagement with the EU. This attitude has been fed by many factors in recent years and has been complicated by issues concerning nationalism, particularly sovereignty and identity. As the EU has grown, member states have had less sovereignty and their citizens have faced a question of European versus national identity. For now and for the foreseeable future, national identity will continue to supersede European identity in the minds of many EU citizens.

**History of the European Union**

The concept of a united Europe became increasingly prevalent during World War II and in the post-war period. Some European states had lost their people’s loyalty, as their state had failed to protect them from the devastation caused by the war (Dalman & Jonsson, 2015). Many looked to the idea of integrating European nations into a federation to provide security and common goals for the future. The United States was seen as a model of political and economic integration, and the success of a federal state.

Some of the key proponents of this idea were Winston Churchill of Great Britain, Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet of France, and Konrad Adenauer of Germany. Winston Churchill spoke about the integration of Europe quite often, but most famously in a speech he delivered in Zurich in 1946. In his speech, he declared, “We must build a United States of Europe,” and, “If Europe is to be saved from infinite misery, and indeed from final doom, there must be this act of faith in the European family, this act of oblivion against all crimes and follies of the past” (Churchill). However, he pictured this integrated Europe as solely continental Europe, a reflection of this quote of his from 1933, “we are with Europe, but not of it” (“Wit and Wisdom”, 2013). Schuman was the prime minister of France in the late 1940s and spoke often of the importance of an integrated European Community as the only way to create lasting peace and prosperity for the member nations (Schuman). He espoused these ideas in detail in what became known as the Schuman Declaration, in which he calls for the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community or ECSC. Jean Monnet, who worked closely with Schuman to create the framework of the ECSC, declared explicitly that the object of the Community was to contribute to the creation of an integrated Europe (Berend, 2016). This community would pool coal and steel production of multiple countries under one High Authority in order to help prevent further war and to keep an eye on war-related production and participation would be open to all Western European countries (Schuman, 1950). Konrad Adenauer, the chancellor of Germany in 1951, was also fully supportive of the federalist objective that underpinned the ECSC, particularly because he wanted Germans to think of themselves as Europeans (Dedman, 1996).

Schuman’s proposal of the creation of the ECSC came to fruition a year after he released it through the Treaty of Paris; the Community was comprised of France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg (Berend, 2016). This treaty signaled the intent of the signees to create a supranational institution, leading toward the economic unification of Europe (*Treaty setting up…,* 1951). Schuman stated that the ECSC was “the first concrete foundation of European federation” (Dedman, 1996). They also subsequently signed a joint declaration that stated their desire, “to lay the foundations, through the establishment of an economic pool, of a broader and deeper community between people long divided by cruel strife and to prepare the ground for institutions capable of guiding a destiny henceforth to be shared in common” (*Treaty setting up*…*,* 1951). This phrasing expresses the leaders’ desire for a shared community and belief in common goals.

Following the establishment of the ECSC, the organization progressed to become the European Economic Community through the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (Dedman, 1996). This document established a common market of manufactured goods and common agricultural policy with the details laid out by the end of 1958. It designed a fairly ambitious program for economic expansion through the removal of tariffs, export subsidies, export taxes, and revenue duties on imports within the Community (Dedman, 1996). The preamble of the Treaty states that the signees were “determined to lay the foundations of an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe” (*Treaty of Rome,* 1957). However, the agreement’s emphasis was on the short and medium-term commercial benefits, rather than the political possibilities of the future (Dedman, 1996).

The European Economic Community had established a fairly effective and stable economic union by 1970, which made the question of expansion to other countries a foremost consideration. The organization made its first enlargement in 1973 by admitting the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Ireland (Dedman, 1996). Britain’s entrance into the EEC followed more than a decade of contentious history. The UK had entered into talks with the ECSC in 1955, which ended on terrible terms. At that time, the UK foreign minister tried to steer talks toward a free trade area and away from an economic union by playing off the known tensions between the French and German leaders, which angered the ECSC’s leaders who saw the move as sabotage (Dedman, 1996). After this miscalculation, the British saw the economies of EEC members grow at faster rates than their own; between 1958 and 1972, GNP per capita grew by 178% in West Germany, 185% in France, 180% in Italy, and only 140% in the UK (Dedman, 1996, p. 105). This mistake by the British and their initial decision not to join the Community can in part be explained by a misplaced confidence in the Commonwealth’s economic stability (Dedman, 1996). Since it entered the EU, the UK has continually attempted to steer the organization’s goals away from integration and more toward that of a trade organization, without political power. This history demonstrates that from the beginning, the UK has feared losing its sovereignty to the European Union.

The EEC then progressed further through several treaties before changing its name officially to the European Union in 1992 through the Treaty of Maastricht (*Treaty on European Union,* 1992). The Treaty of Maastricht is arguably the most important and influential of the EU’s treaties because it cemented further integration through the establishment of a centralized banking system, common monetary policy through the Euro, and the decision to employ common foreign and security policies (Dedman, 1996). This expansion of power was incredibly significant and was the basis of many critiques about EU overreach and stripping of member states’ autonomy.

**A Growing Sense of “Europeanness”**

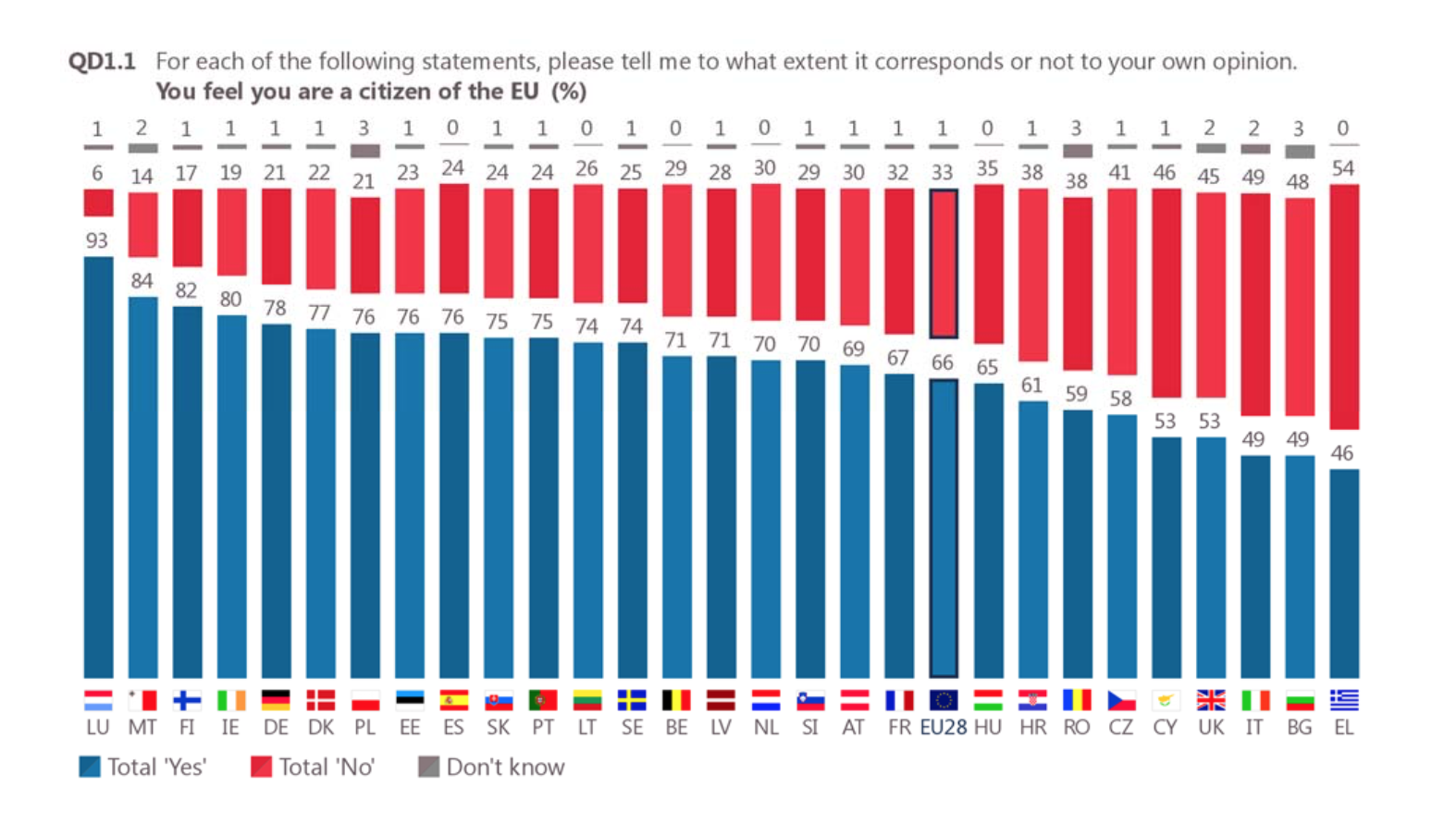
Throughout its evolution, creating a sense of “Europeanness” has been an EU policy goal. Without a sense of comradery and fellowship among its citizens, the entire institution would be ineffective and undermined. The EU has taken steps toward instilling a kind of national pride through celebrating their shared history as a continent, creating European Cities of Culture, and instituting symbols such as their flag, anthem, day of celebration, and motto (EU symbols, 2017). However, the most powerful factor in increasing the strength of European identity has been through the EU’s policies as it has grown and gained more influence in member states, particularly through education programs (Castells, 2002). In general, the effort seems to have been a moderate success. According to a European Parliament survey conducted in 2015, three-quarters of Europeans agreed with the statement: “What unites the citizens of the various [member] countries is more than what divides them” (Nancy, 2015, p. 38). This clearly shows a kinship among EU citizens and it is also reflected in the EU’s motto: Unity in Diversity. However, a problem lies in the area of identity. In spring of 2015, 52% of EU citizens surveyed saw themselves as “(Nationality) and European”, 38% saw themselves solely as their nationality, and 2% solely as European (Nancy, 2015, p. 34). While the European identity did not displace the national identity of its member states, a significant number of EU citizens have a sense of European identity alongside their national identity. This result illustrates the strength of the national identity for many in Europe, as 90% of those surveyed identified with their nationality more so than with Europe. Despite this result, the sense of Europeanness has continued to increase despite the economic crisis of 2008 and was at its highest point yet in 2015 (Nancy, 2015).

In order to understand the construction of this supranational “Europeanness”, the concept of the nation must be defined. Benedict Anderson conceived of a nation as an imagined political community with defined, if elastic, borders (Anderson, 1983, p. 7). A state derives its legitimacy from the national principle, which is underpinned by the people agreeing to belong to that community. The nation is a deep comradeship, and it is imagined because it is impossible in any modern nation for a person to know every other member of the nation so they have to imagine the affinity that they have for their fellows (Anderson, 1983). The European Union can logically be defined within this description, as it has defined borders and has been constructed explicitly but also within the minds of the people, from which it derives its power and sovereignty. EU citizens have a perception of the “nation” of Europe, so the EU could be considered a nation through Anderson’s definition.

There are two broad categories of nationalism definitions: civic and ethnic. Anderson’s definition falls into the civic definition of nationalism, which is built upon subscription to common values and a sense of shared purpose (Jaskulowski, 2010). An ethnic nation is based on a common history, language, ancestry, and culture (Jaskulowski, 2010). With the multiplicity of languages, cultures, histories, and attitudes that it contains, the ethnic concept inherently clashes with the European Union. However, many citizens may conceive of their member state within the EU as an ethnic nation.

If the European Union is a civic nation and has a national identity, there must be characteristics that define it. These values are based on the Western European democratic model and include ideas such as peace, tolerance, democracy, and cultural diversity (Fligstein, 2012). The Copenhagen Criteria, established as the criteria by which applications to join the EU should be evaluated, are evidence of these underlying principles. These standards include that member countries guarantee democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights, which in turn reflect the standards of the citizens in that country (“Conditions for Membership…”, 2018). By this definition, if an individual within the EU subscribes to those values, then they belong to the European nation. According to surveys such as the Eurobarometer, the groups most likely to feel the strongest ties to the European Union are those who are in higher socioeconomic groups, speak more than one language, have lived in other countries in the EU, belong to the younger generation (below age 35), and are more highly educated (Fligstein, 2012, p. 109-110).

These groups’ particular leaning in favor of Europe can in part be traced back to EU policies. The Erasmus program, an educational program which allows students to study at other universities within the EU, has exposed a large segment of the younger generation to the other cultures and people within the EU (Fligstein, 2012). Another factor comes from the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992: the free movement of workers throughout the EU. This allows European citizens to live and work in any EU member state without having to give up their current citizenship, acquire a green card, or obtain a work visa (“Treaty on European Union”, 1992). These are primary factors in the younger generation’s tendency to feel more strongly European than older generations; the clear majority of them appreciate the opportunity to travel with the Erasmus program and to be able to look for work anywhere in the twenty-eight member states with minimal hassle.

Another widely debated aspect of “Europeanness” concerns the dichotomy between Western and Eastern Europe. The viewpoint of some nationalism scholars is that Eastern European nations are fundamentally ethnically nationalist and Western European nations are civically nationalist (Jaskulowski, 2010). However, this is clearly not the case. Western Europe has seen ethnic nationalist political parties at various points in history, from the 1940s in Germany to present day France (Jaskulowski, 2010). Nationalism in many societies throughout Europe has been based on cultural, linguistic, and/or religious commonality; this is not exclusively an Eastern European phenomenon. Scholars have pointed to Western European countries as creators and upholders of civic nationalism and the EU and viewed Eastern Europe as undermining the construction of an overarching European identity (Stråth, 2008). However, this has not been shown to be the case. In a Standard Eurobarometer survey conducted in May 2016 (see chart below), countries such as Poland, Estonia, and Slovakia had three-quarters of respondents say they felt they were citizens of the EU (“Standard Eurobarometer 85”, 2016). This contradicts the theory that Eastern European countries are predisposed to ethnic nationalism, as more of them feel that they are members of the European Union than many Western European countries like France, the UK, and Italy.

If the EU is a civic nation based on the values of democracy and peace, how does it instill these values in its citizens through its policies and continue to increase feelings of European citizenship? In a document prepared for the President of the European Union in 2000, Manuel Castells, a prominent sociologist and professor at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, suggests ways in which to further instill European identity and values, without the EU attempting to become a federal state. His approach focuses on sharing cultural and social practices throughout Europe, with the citizens of the EU being the main drivers of the effort. This goes along with Benedict Anderson’s theory of nationalism as resulting from the people’s choice to believe in it. He states that “only if citizens realize that by being Europeans they can act upon global issues in terms of their own values and interests, will they realize how important it is” (p. 8-9). He argues that the European Union has allowed Europe to be influential in the world, and thereby given EU citizens greater economic and political status than they otherwise would have if they were simply citizens of their member country. Overall, he concludes that it will be difficult for the EU to increase European identity without becoming heavy-handed or seeming as though it is attempting to construct a “United States of Europe” (Castells, 2001). Support for an integrated Europe has waned significantly since the genesis of the European Coal and Steel Community because at that time there was much more fear of economic instability or another war. As the nations recovered, they became less inclined to be dependent or tied to other nations as the memory of war and devastation grew more distant.

As has been established, the EU does constitute a nation and has built a national identity that is moderately strong amongst EU citizens. However, EU citizens also belong to their own nation-states, other than the EU, which raises the question of whether a person can identify himself or herself with more than one nation. This enters the territory of supranationalism and multiculturalism. According to most theorists, including Anthony D. Richmond, a future of ethnic and cultural diversity with supranational states can be achieved but not without a great deal of conflict in the transition from nationalism to multinationalism to supranationalism (p. 300). His outlook is reflective of the difficulty in reconciling more than one sense of identity, resulting from cognitive dissonance, and the opposition that supranational organizations face from nation states over power and sovereignty.

**Factors Affecting European Identity**

The struggle between nationalism and European supranational identity has been underscored by several recent factors. One such factor is the Euro crisis. After it was finalized in the Maastricht treaty in 1992, the Euro became the common currency for the EU (with some exceptions) and began the financial and economic integration of Europe (Berend, 2016). The idea was first introduced in the 1970s, but it took nearly three decades to come to fruition due to backlash in member states. Many feared that giving up sole power over their country’s currency would be incredibly detrimental, and lead to further loss of sovereignty. Eventually, however, economic interests won out because the Euro was needed to simplify exchanges and cheapen European business activities (Berend, 2016). In 2008, at the start of the global financial crisis, fifteen member states had joined the Eurozone. The rest of the countries not on the Euro were either not on it because they had opted out of the original agreement (Denmark and the UK), or because they failed to meet the criteria to join, such as having a debt to GDP ratio of less than 60% (Dedman, 1996).

As the Euro began to crash along with global markets, members of the Eurozone saw declining economic growth. The crisis revolved around the countries of Greece, Italy, Ireland, and Spain, but with Greece as the key factor. In joining the Eurozone, the government of Greece had misrepresented its debt to GDP ratio and other aspects of its financial situation (Hall, 2012). In 2009 and 2010, the Greek economy crashed and the country became locked in a debt spiral, which occurs when a country’s debt is larger than their GDP and they must continue borrowing money to pay off their debt. In a normal situation, the debtor country would be able to devalue their currency in order to help stabilize the economy to some extent. However, because the Greek currency was the Euro and it was tied to fourteen other countries, the government was unable to take this step toward lessening the crisis. This resulted in the rest of the EU, particularly Germany, taking steps to bail out Greece in order to preserve the Eurozone (Hall, 2012). In response to this crisis, EU citizens began to lose faith in the EU’s ability to promote their economic interests and began to turn toward their national governments (Dalman et al., 2015).

The Euro crisis also prompted a great deal of internal immigration within the European Union. The increased immigration became another factor contributing to the rise of nationalism instead of European identity. As more foreigners – mostly EU citizens moving around within the EU looking for work – entered other member countries, many reacted angrily and there was a marked increase in ethnic nationalist rhetoric (Dalman et al., 2012). This anti-immigrant attitude brings to light one of the key aspects of nationalism: it defines itself by what it is not. Nationalism creates an out-group, the group of people that do not fit into the outlined parameters of the nation that it has constructed, particularly in the case of ethnic nationalism. Through this immigration issue and the subsequent refugee crisis, many people in the EU began to define themselves more by ethnicity and culture than by their civic values (Stråth, 2008).

Both the Euro crisis and immigration issues have been used as a rationale for supporting far-right political parties in Europe. These far-right parties are usually nationalist and therefore anti-EU, as they see the EU as seeking to undermine their nation’s sovereignty. Such parties tend to embrace the ethnic conception of nationalism; part of their appeal could be attributed to their ability to play on the differences between European and national identity (Fligstein, 2012). Many fear cultural, linguistic, and ethnic dilution as a result of further integration or expansion of the EU (Fligstein, 2012). This has been a fear held by nationalists for decades; it is rooted in the belief that the EU will eventually try to overcome the nations that comprise it to become a European federation of states with the EU at the center (Fligstein, 2012). The EU has gained more and more competencies throughout the years, taking more and more control away from the national governments of its members, which has fed into this fear. The emergence of these far-right parties espousing nationalistic rhetoric in Europe has led center-right parties to adopt anti-immigrant stances in order to undercut the far-right (Fligstein, 2012).

The largest example of this kind of nationalist sentiment against the EU was Brexit. On June 23, 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU by a margin of four percent (Jackson-Preece, 2016, p. 1). This vote was a realization of the nationalist idea of political autonomy. While not all those who voted Leave can be called nationalists, the vote has been an event that nationalist parties all over Europe have celebrated as a victory for the nation-state over the supranational organization (Jackson-Preece, 2016). A critical discourse analysis of political and public discourse in the United Kingdom conducted during the three months before the referendum vote reveals the role that rhetoric concerning European identity played in the decision (White et al., 2016). The results were surprising because they showed that support of the EU was premised with national belonging and loyalty, while the concept of European identity based on cultural similarity was used as an argument against the EU. Discussions of Britain’s “greatness” were prevalent on both sides, but for those on the “Leave” side these reflections seemed to harken back to the British Empire as a source of national pride (White et al., 2016, p. 45). The “Leave” campaign also emphasized the specialness of the UK, as a reason that it needed to abandon the EU; they focused on the UK as ‘above’ the EU and how it must leave before its specialness is diminished by association with the rest of the EU (White et al., 2016, p. 47). In general, the EU was framed by the Leave campaign as an anti-democratic bureaucratic machine, in contrast with the British nation, which is rooted in a common past and characteristics (White et al., 2016). All of these rhetorical factors together contributed to the nationalistic argument for leaving the European Union.

**Conclusion**

After all of these events, the question of the future of the EU arises. There are three conceivable options: the EU can either remain as it is (with or without the UK), it can disband, or it can continue to grow in power until it does become a true United States of Europe. At this point, there has been no consensus among international relations, history, or political scholars’ predictions about what will happen to the European Union, in part because there has never before been an organization even similar in structure to the EU. Belief in the goals of the EU and European identification is undoubtedly still strong, which indicates that the disintegration of the EU is unlikely, but the structure of it may change. Following Anderson’s theory, the idea of the nation is what is most important and so long as the European identity is strong enough, it will continue to survive but will most likely continue to be second to national identity.

At its start, the European Union was envisaged as a supranational economic and political institution that would unite Europe and create a common sense of purpose and comradery: European identity. The EU has instituted many efforts aimed at increasing the feeling of Europeanness in EU citizens and throughout the last forty years, it has been moderately successful. In recent years, a variety of events have led to a rise in ethnic nationalist and anti-EU attitudes, which has led to less trust in the EU’s institutions. However, the European identity has continued to grow despite these events and the decline in trust in the EU. This could indicate that the European identity may actually have the potential to grow into a strong enough identity to rival that of a true nation-state. Currently, national identity is too strong among the citizens for the European identity to be able to truly compete, despite its consistent growth, and will likely continue to be second to national identity.

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