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IDENTITIES, DEMOCRACY, BORDERS

Within Europe, an area of relatively indeterminate contours, attempts at reconciliation and integration have yielded tangible results in political, economic, social and cultural matters. The objectives of this were widely accepted: to ensure lasting peace, economic growth and global security, as well as the freedom to act, to create and to think.

Yet for some this integration has been too rapid, especially towards the east, and this has created a new East/West differentiation, in addition to the older North/South divide. This way of viewing the phenomenon, however, is diminishing in importance, as it largely ignores internal disparities within most national territories. After a relative consensus of hope and confidence in the future, the European arena can be nowadays described as dominated by fears, by disappointments, and in particular by distrust towards national governments in a context of crisis and human drama, widely publicized through the media. This context can be seen as both the trigger and the manifestation of these fears and threats.

In last years, at least four “crises” (the Ukrainian “crisis”, the Greek financial “crisis”, the “crisis” of migrants/refugees, the “Brexit”) have been or still are the centre of media coverage, and of public and political debates. They are, however, viewed quite differently in the West and the East and the North and South of the EU, depending in particular on the geographical or cultural proximity of each member state to the countries concerned, or to the external borders of the EU, or indeed to other factors.

Thus, the use by European politicians and media of the terms “migrants” and “refugees” and the positions taken by governments in Central and Eastern Europe have been interpreted in different ways, sometimes with specific historical references. Recourse has also been made to “European values”, which are viewed as the cement holding the EU together: for example, “How can new member States refuse to show solidarity with the Greeks?”, or “Why they are so reluctant to host ‘refugees’”, “Have they ‘forgotten’ how they were welcomed in the West, even after 1989?”

A quick analysis of the results of the Eurobarometer from spring 2015 until now highlights a significant division within the European Union’s territory, based on national comparisons. It shows differentiated hierarchies of fears and hopes, and differences if not in the values themselves, at least in the relative importance

given to these values. Against the aforementioned background we must also take account of new links that are developing between local and national public spaces, networks, and practices, even if they are still in a minority. This is happening throughout the European Union's territory and that of its neighbours, and is leading to the emergence of a new European reality.

The situation seems paradoxical. On the one hand, supposedly profound differences are articulated within and between Member States, including a lack of communication (even inability to communicate); perceptions, representations and expressions are different, in particular relating to the "crises". Yet, a more and more important section of the EU's total population (10% is often quoted) has become "mobile", works in another country, and travels across Europe without any sense of being or behaving like a migrant. This population is constructing a new kind of composite identity.

The "Erasmus generation" is not just a marketing slogan; it corresponds to a practical reality for a growing number of European students. "Another" Europe seems to be emerging, most probably a long-lasting one, helped also by other collective developments such as transnational networks, NGOs, social or cultural initiatives. This "other" Europe is small, ordinary, without surprises or discoveries; mobile citizens are looking for new modes of participation and the evolution of the democratic process particularly in relation to national elections, for a diminished role for political parties, for local debates.

This dichotomous if not paradoxical situation is not a "transition" in the sense of a step from one situation to another, and it remains to be seen how it will influence the issues of identity and citizenship. European citizenship may become a reality through the assumption of responsibilities and not only through the understanding (and implementation) of rights.

The analyses of these developments, articulating the local and the global, show the incorporation of new habits, attitudes and mobility and could bring new concrete elements to the European Union which is still trying to establish a more democratic way of functioning which is "owned" by its citizens, and with a more efficient governance. Building identity involves both otherness and communion, and allows at the same time differentiation (with "them") and a social inclusion (in a "we"). Therefore, it seems logical that European construction should reinforce identity feelings, often at the level of "nations" and not of states. The contact with the "Other" activates the identity mechanism. Often, European identity is experienced in negative form, by confrontation with otherness rather than similarity.

How to build a European identity without a defined “image” of Europe? Europe has vague contours and the EU has no communication policy, no strategy of building an image that can contribute to the support of citizens. Identities – including European identities – are multiple within the European area which is itself defined, precisely, by citizens’ feelings of belonging to it. Such circularity certainly contributes to the confusion. Changing expectations, the growth of social networks and social changes within the framework of the information society contribute to the transformation of local or national public domains that make use of a new developing domain with new borders. How then can we turn constraints into opportunities, with a commitment, which allows us to hope that, whatever the evolution of the European construction, the citizen would be able to participate in community life, in exchange, and in sharing?

The terms nationality and citizenship often seem to be used as synonyms, at least in the western parts of the European Union. In a context of withdrawal into one’s nation and the contraction of horizons – it is tempting to link the term nationality with identity, a term that is both paradoxical and has multiple meanings – because it signifies both the same and the different; or even to make the link between sense of belonging and national. Identity – identities – both connect and distinguish, in a game of social, political, economic or psychological determinations. It is important to take into account the inflation of the use of this word and the search to clarify its borders; the relationship between nationality and identity is even more relevant to the current situation because the perceptions and representations of media generated “crises” have become part of a national logic, of a nationalism, which has become, perhaps, “cultural”.

This connection is dynamic because the legitimization process, and thus the construction of the European institutions (in the broadest sense of being related to the European Union), are inseparable from the process of identity construction. These institutions aim through their actions, their programmes and their policies, to contribute to the formation of European identity. European identity is also complicated because it means both general recognition of the Union and the “Europeanness” of citizens, which is supposed to promote the institutional integration of its member countries. In such way, both political legitimacy and individual identity development should be articulated in a virtuous articulation that cannot be decreed and that requires the daily efforts of citizens, of their governments and of the local and European institutions.

The semantic collusion relating to European identity as well as to the uses of the words Europe or European lead to (or uncover) opposing positions whose

foundations remain vague, even after almost half a century of integrative institutional evolution. European identity, in the strict sense of recognition and political legitimacy, is thus largely opposed to national identities. Nevertheless, the low level of political legitimacy of the European Union and of its institutions does not restrain the installation of a certain sense of belonging to a “space” beyond national frontiers or even beyond the European Union’s borders. The identity claims in Central and Eastern Europe are examples of this evolution.

A great deal is often made of the centrifugal attitudes of Member States and the “nationalist” identity dynamic of citizens, and yet it is possible to analyse those identity dynamics as concentric or cumulative. National identity would then be parallel to a European identity, and would not proceed with the same logic. It seems useful to try to put into perspective identity, nationalism and citizenship and to propose a reflection about the boundaries of these concepts, returning, basically, to identifiers (the feelings of belonging to something, as well as determinants and identity references) and integrators (institutional and political legitimacy).

The practice of EU citizenship, the appropriation and the legitimisation by some of those institutions and their functioning are carriers of values and meaning. The articulations between local and supra-regional conceptions and their impacts on identity constructions deserve to be explored, including for foreign residents from a third country or from a “neighbourhood” whether officially recognised as such or not. It can be especially interesting to explore the tangle of European and local institutional discourses mobilised in the discursive and identity strategies of citizens or intended for citizens.

“Young” Europeans are a particularly interesting segment of the population in this exploration of European identity, in the West as well as in the East, in the North and in the South and – to include an approach that is often ignored – even within individual territories and regions.

Indeed, in the West most of them were born, when their country was already a member of the European Union; for them the euro and free movement are everyday realities. In the East, the accession to the European Union and its consequences, particularly in terms of reconstruction and institutional transformations took place when they were growing up. A large proportion of them already have been or are able to benefit from the policy of cultural, educational or economic exchanges in the European Union.

Identity withdrawals, local and national, throughout the European area (thus beyond the EU), can be clearly connected to crises relating to citizenship and

are manifested in particular by the levels of abstentions in elections. New exclusions and failing policies are denounced, while the political class loses its credibility. The European institutions then appear as an assembly of experts – if not a new class of privileged or elected officials who above all inspire suspicion, while Members of the European Parliament have little connection to an active idea of citizenship, because they are generally elected on the basis of national frameworks and programmes. The passing of time is not sufficient to evaluate the effects of the current Treaty's new provisions. Thus, new borders, real and symbolic, have appeared inside the Schengen area and the Member States, while citizens have changed their modes of participation and public and digital spaces transform the frameworks of social and political life.

If many borders seem to have disappeared, even if challenged by controls related to emergencies, others have appeared. Throughout the world, never have so many new walls been built. In addition to a legitimisation of “fortress” Europe, within this space other types of borders, mental ones, have been put in place. Identity mechanisms, of course, need limits, frontiers, which bring structure and coherence and allow identities to exist whilst also allowing us to imagine otherness. The important question is not to wonder if borders are a necessity or not, but to properly define what type of borders we need: a passage or a wall, and to try to imagine which kinds of limits are acceptable, legitimate, and useful.

This thematic issue of *Politické vedy* proposes papers which have been developed with cooperation with the “Jean Monnet European Research Network Identity, Culture, and Multilingualism Exchanges” (EUROMECC)¹. This volume contributes to uncovering descriptions and analyses of situations, perceptions, attitudes, representations, uses and activities of the citizens, not only of the European Union, in particular with respect to identity dynamics.

Gilles Rouet, Jaroslav Ušiak

¹ The Jean Monnet Network “European Identity, Culture, Exchanges and Multilingualism” (EUROMECC) aims to build knowledge and become a reference point for researchers in the themes of European identity, culture, European citizenship, exchanges and multilingualism. The network is coordinated by Prof. Maria Stoicheva, *Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”*, with the support of the “Jean Monnet” initiative of Erasmus+ programme on the European Commission. (see EUROMECC, 2017)

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