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CULTURE, HERITAGE AND EUROPEAN IDENTITY²

Sense of Belonging Through Culture and Cultural Heritage

Among the key objectives of the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 (EYCH) was not only to encourage more people to discover and engage with Europe's rich cultural heritage, but also to reinforce a sense of belonging to a common European space. This is based on the underlying assumption that cultural heritage and culture in general are fundamental for shaping a supra-national identity that transcends existing national collective identities.

It is, therefore, not surprising that culture and cultural heritage became an integral element of European political discourses on a collective European identity long before the EYCH, notably since the very beginning of the European project after the Second World War.³ The significance of the notion of 'European cultural heritage' is clearly manifested, for example, in the *Copenhagen Declaration* on European Identity adopted by the nine foreign ministers of the then European Communities on 14 December 1973. This represents what is perhaps the most explicit statement of a common European identity from a European political body to date, standing out for its prescriptivism and the fact that it elucidates the principle of unity over that of diversity.⁴ While the Declaration does acknowledge the "variety of national cultures" and the "dynamism of European identity", its emphasis is firmly on the cultural

1 The opinions expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the European Parliament.

2 For a more detailed account of 'identity' and its challenges in a European context, see Prutsch, Markus J. 2017. *European Identity*. Brussels: European Parliament, on which this contribution is largely based.

3 Given the importance ascribed to it, it is not surprising that the promotion and protection of cultural heritage has also become enshrined in the European Treaties. See especially Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union (OJ C 202, 07.06.2016, p. 13–45) and Article 167 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (OJ C 202, 07.06.2016, p. 47–199).

4 See *Declaration on European Identity*, Copenhagen, 14 December 1973, Bulletin of the European Communities 1973, Vol. 12, p. 118–122.

commonalities of the European nations, and their attachment to “common values and principles” (Articles 1 and 3) – representative democracy, the rule of law, social justice, and respect for human rights, all of which are considered as “fundamental elements of the European Identity”.

While the Copenhagen Declaration represents an early example of a clearly affirmative political stance towards a European identity, which was to be followed by a number of other initiatives, it is concurrently also characteristic of two intrinsic challenges to the very concept of ‘European identity’ that have continued to be central to the present day: first, that despite its wide – some may even say inflationary – usage in both public and political discourse, ‘European identity’ lacks conceptual clarity, with a broad range of meanings ascribed to and expectations associated with the term; second, that the question on the relation of a culturally substantiated identity to a more ‘political’ identity is left open. The latter is also reflected in the existence of two different schools of thought.

Intricacies of a ‘European Identity’ and the EU’s Policies

In general, two competing understandings of European identity and its repository can be distinguished: 1) Europe as a cultural community of shared values; 2) Europe as a political community of shared democratic practices. The idea of Europe as a cultural community is in the tradition of identitarian concepts of identity that have in particular been applied to the nation state, and places emphasis on common cultural legacies and historical experiences. The idea of Europe as a political community stresses the bonding capacity of democratic institutions and active civic engagement, giving rise to a democratic political culture.

Whether Europe is seen as a cultural or a political community implies a different emphasis on the core and the objectives of a transnational identity, as well as on possible policies aimed at fostering such an identity. While this distinction may be useful in analytical terms, it does not imply any strict ‘either/or’, ‘right or wrong’ choices to be made. An argument can be made instead for ‘Europeanness’ having to be defined both politically and culturally, not only in the sense that there is evidence for Europe having at least some identifiable elements of a political (manifested, for instance, in existing political structures such as the EU, the Council of Europe, or the OSCE) as well as cultural community (despite all the differences, shared historical and cultural experiences, such as the influence of Greek and Roman philosophy, the Enlightenment, or classical music are far from negligible). It also seems that if a trans-European

identity is to be successfully strengthened, a combination of both political and cultural efforts will be indispensable. Criticism of cultural concepts of European identity as being too close to the traditional model of the nation – hence, at best, replacing national with European chauvinism, if feasible at all given the cultural diversity of Europe – are certainly justified. However, the alternative of a ‘political identity’ alone seems too weak to guarantee the unfolding of a broad trans-European sense of belonging, not least since concepts such as ‘constitutional patriotism’ remain too abstract and elitist to have a broad public impact. A cultural component, therefore, needs to form an integral part of any reflection on European identity, though without merely reverting to primordial concepts of national identity. In the best-case scenario, the existing criticisms of cultural and political identity concepts alike might be integrated into a more inclusive vision of identity – one which is culturally substantiated and is not only fully compatible with the ideal of a democratic, open and citizen-centred society but actually reinforces such a society.

European policies aimed at fostering a collective transnational identity that is both cultural as well as political have gained momentum since the turn of the century, in parallel to the European project facing increasing obstacles. This is manifested, for instance, in the Europe for Citizens Programme launched in 2006⁵ that is currently in its second generation and pays tribute to historical memory and, thus, to the cultural dimension of European identity, as well as emphasising active citizenship (political identity). Equally manifested in Europe for Citizens is another discernible shift over time in EU policies, namely from an almost exclusive ‘top-down’ to a more ‘bottom-up’ approach, cherishing individual experience and action.

At the same time, however – and concomitant with the uncertain fate of European integration as such – growing discomfort vis-à-vis the idea of a European identity and an increasingly polemical debate on the issue are discernible more recently.

What are, then, the chances for any supranational layer of identification with Europe to emerge in the nearer future?

5 See Decision No 1904/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2006 establishing for the period 2007 to 2013 the programme Europe for Citizens to promote active European citizenship (OJ L 378, 27.12.2006, p. 32-40).

Prospects of a Common European Identity

While the prospects for a proper European identity appear grim, considering the general difficulties of building transnational identity and the current political framework in particular, fostering a European sense of belonging among citizens seems to be within the realms of possibility. For the EU, such fostering is nothing less than a *sine qua non* if the Union is to be endured as a political entity requiring corresponding legitimacy and public support.

Inevitably, any European layer of political identification requires positioning towards and arrangement with entrenched national identities. With a view to minimise potential conflicts between those identities and a novel 'post-national' type of allegiance, basing the EU's legitimacy exclusively on its output is an appealing perspective. But while 'output legitimacy' merits more attention to be paid both in theory and politics than is currently the case (given the scarcity of structural prerequisites for 'input legitimacy' alone, such as a common language or a European *demos*), other sources of identification with 'Europe' and the EU more particularly are indispensable. This is not just because the EU's means to pursue 'good policies' for which it can claim ownership is limited, but also because relying merely on output puts any body politic on shaky ground. What seems best suited for a European sense of belonging to emerge is supplementing output performance with policies that promote even more decidedly than is currently being done both a political and a cultural identity, and bring bottom-up initiatives even more centre stage.

In this context, a key role for the genesis of any 'European identity' can be ascribed to history and remembrance as a specific form of 'cultural heritage'. The underlying rationale is as follows: if European people cannot even agree on how to assess and handle their past, how can they possibly find common ground in dealing with the present and tackling the future? For quite some time, European policies have indeed made an effort to foster a 'European historical memory'⁶ in order to add legitimacy to the European project. Yet doubts arise as to the suitability of these efforts for the development of a European identity, since they are characterised by a narrow focus of historical remembrance on the experiences of 20th century totalitarianism. Concentrating European efforts for transnational historical remembrance on the traumata of

6 On the issue of a European historical memory, see Prutsch, Markus J. 2015. *European Historical Memory: Policies, Challenges and Perspectives*. Brussels: European Parliament (2nd edition).

the 20th century proves problematic in two respects. First, such an approach fosters a simplistic and biased black-and-white scheme of history that makes Europe's 'dark past' appear as the logical alternative to its 'bright present', thus doing injustice to the richness and complexity of European history. Second, narrowing historical memory to National Socialism and Stalinism, elevated to the status of a 'negative foundation myth', reduces any incentive to critically examine stereotypes and sacred cows of one's national history, and hampers the development of a sense of shared European responsibility for the past (and present).

Accordingly, a reflexive and process-oriented 'culture of remembering', rather than an imposed and prescriptive 'remembrance culture' (with standardised views on and reference points for Europe's past), is argued to be the nucleus of a common European identity. Such a 'culture of remembering' places emphasis on *how* rather than *what* to remember and requires capacities for a (self-) critical 'reworking of the past' to be generated at the national level, providing incentives for scrutinising diverse and often divisive memories under a consciously transnational and European perspective. For successful implementation, corresponding education policies are indispensable. These policies would be ideally guided by the double *leitmotif* of 'dare to know!' and 'dare to act!' and would lay the foundation for a vivid civic political culture: a political culture finding expression in a sense of shared possession of and responsibility for the common good and citizens' active participation politically as well as socially – a cardinal element of which is cognisant and unbiased 'work on history'.

At the same time, however, 'work on history' not only can but, indeed, should be accompanied and complemented by cherishing Europe's actual cultural heritage, be it tangible or intangible. In this context, the role of the EYCH 2018 – which can claim to have been a success (no matter whether one might have liked to see an even more 'European' Year or an even more active involvement of citizens) – can hardly be overrated: it is only by understanding the richness and diversity of our manifold cultural expressions that eventually a common sense of ownership, commonality, and unity may emerge with regard to those cultural expressions. It is here that music as the, perhaps, most universal of all our cultural forms plays a leading role.

Whether there will – or even should – ever be a full-fledged European identity must remain an open question. Yet, at least one thing seems clear: that many of the polemics surrounding contemporary debates on the subject could be mitigated if different forms of identity were not misleadingly perceived as

‘exclusive’ but rather compatible with each other. Multiple identities are a living reality today, with distinct regional and national identities existing parallelly in many parts of Europe and the world without being detrimental to each other. Consequently, there appears to be no convincing argument as to why the existing multiplicity and interaction of political and cultural identities might not be complemented – and likely enriched – by an additional layer of identification, whether it be European or even cosmopolitan.

Above all, we need to realise that identity is not something to be lost but rather something to be gained.