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# Conceptualising European Identity – Normative, Theoretical, and Empirical Dimensions

## Abstract

*In this paper, European identity is conceptualised by integrating normative, conceptual and empirical considerations into a working definition. The argument is based on two related questions: first, what is the relation between EU democratisation and EU identity formation from a normative point of view? Second, what has to be understood by European identity – from a normative, conceptual and empirical point of view? The first part of this paper introduces European identity as a multi-level concept. The second explores the relationship between EU democratisation and EU identity formation from a normative perspective. The third part discusses the interrelation between EU identity formation and EU democratization. The fourth investigates the relation of democratic identity and group differences. In the fifth, European identity is conceptualised as collective identity. The sixth part presents empirical research results on European identity, and the seventh part sums up the working definition. The concluding eighth part discusses the different perspectives on European identity.*

**Key words:** European Identity, EU democratization, collective identity, No-demos-thesis, EU citizenship, EU civil society, EU public space.

**JEL Classification:** F53, Z13.

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## Introduction

This paper's argument is based on a normative perspective on European identity that originated in the debate on the EU's democratic deficit: chances and limits of an EU democratization are linked to the development of an EU identity, as democracy needs a *demos*, a democratic subject. Democratic institutions and procedures need to be carried and actively filled by a democratic subject that defines itself as such (at least to a minimum extent). Democratic identity in this context names the self-identification of the democratic subject, i.e., the awareness of and the identification with the polity that rights and democratic practice relate to.

But what exactly is meant when a European identity is claimed? When looking at the debate on European Identity, it soon becomes evident that the contributors do not have an identical definition of European identity and its components – and several of them do not even define it clearly. The label European Identity is often left open to interpretation (see in detail Wiesner 2014). This confusion in the debate is largely related to the fact that it is a multi-level concept that includes normative, conceptual and empirical aspects (see below).

Accordingly, normative, conceptual and empirical considerations on European identity will be discussed in order to develop a working definition step by step. The argument is based on two related questions: first, what is the relationship between EU democratisation and EU identity formation from a normative point of view? Second, what has to be understood by European identity – from a normative, conceptual and empirical point of view? The paper, thus, seeks to contribute to two fields of research. First, it is a contribution to the debate on EU democratisation (see, e.g., Bellamy and Castiglione 2003; Hix 2008; Føllesdal and Hix 2006; Mény 2003; Beetham and Lord 1998; Moravcsik 2002; Majone 1998), and second, to the debate on EU identity formation from both theoretical and empirical perspective (see below).

The first part will introduce European identity as a multi-level concept. The second will explore the relationship between EU democratisation and EU identity formation from a normative perspective. The third part discusses the interrelation between EU identity formation and EU democratization. The fourth part explores the relation of democratic identity and group differences. In the fifth, European identity is conceptualised as collective identity. The sixth part presents empirical research results on European identity, and the seventh part sums up the working definition. The concluding eighth part discusses the various perspectives on European identity.

## European Identity as a Multi-Level Concept

First, in order to conceptualise European identity, it is important to underline that it is a multilevel concept (similar to politicization, see Wiesner 2019). As succinctly put by Matthew Wood, “A ‘multilevel concept’ is one that can be applied in multiple contexts, and can have both a deep critical theoretical and even philosophical meaning, but also refers quite legitimately to concrete acts that can be usefully measured in empirical research” (Wood 2015: 527).

It follows that such a concept can be employed at “a theoretical level, a ‘mid-range’ conceptual level and a ‘micro’ empirical level” (Wood 2015: 522).

To conceptualise European identity as a multi-level concept means accordingly to clarify respectively what analytical level one is on: macro/meso/micro. Thus, in European identity research one should distinguish making great philosophical and/or normative claims from reflecting how they can be operationalized and measuring concretely operationalized items and research dimensions. Accordingly, in the social sciences, three main strands in research on European identity can be differentiated: 1) approaches in political theory or philosophy that often have a strong normative background, 2) individually oriented definitions that more or less relate to the approach of David Easton (Easton 1953; Easton 1965) and that focus on identification and support of individuals for a political system, and 3) macro-oriented approaches that regard identity as a pattern of meaning, i.e., that regard the contents that identification and support relate to. While these strands obviously relate to the multi-level character of the concept of European identity, they are sometimes not clearly distinguished.

In a multi-level conceptualization of European identity, all these perspectives need to be integrated. I therefore argue, first, that micro- and macro levels of identity are related. This means that democratic identity includes, on the one hand, individual orientations that can be empirically analysed on the micro level, and on the other hand, it includes patterns of meaning that can be analysed on the macro level (see below for the methodological background of this argument).

Second, the normative view on identity that is presented in this paper is more far-reaching than in the Eastonian model of identification and support. I argue that a democratic identity is not only a condition for the stability of a political system (identification and support) but that self-identification of the *demos* is also a condition

for political participation, deliberation, and protest – it is a condition for a *demos* to indeed *do* democracy.

## European Union Democratisation and European Union Identity Formation: Normative Considerations

On the first conceptual level, the normative-theoretical one, my argument is that the relation between EU democratisation and identity development can be summed up as follows: Democracy, no matter if it is conceptualised following a republican, communitarian or liberal ideal, needs to be exhibited not only in election or citizenship rights, but also in democratic practice. This means that EU democratisation has to go hand in hand with the development of an EU *demos*, of a democratic subject in the EU. This is a normative condition since democratic institutions and procedures must be carried and actively filled by a democratic subject that defines itself as such.

Asking about the perspectives of further EU democratisation entails the question of the perspectives of an EU *demos*. *Demos*-building and identity-formation in this sense are necessary in a democratic polity for several reasons: It is a condition for political activity that the *demos* is at least conscious of the fact that it is linked to a respective polity – that is, people should consider themselves as members of that polity. If this is not the case people will not direct their political activity to it. Moreover, to make redistributive policies acceptable, the members of the *demos* should mutually identify themselves as such.

Democratic Identity in this respect refers to the fact that the democratic subject defines itself as such, or more exactly: *democratic identity means the self-identification of a democratic subject, a demos*. In that sense, the EU can be judged to be on a good track. The development of an EU *demos* and European identity is no longer in its beginning (see in detail Wiesner 2007; Wiesner 2018). A democratic EU identity in the sense of a minimum degree of self-identification of the EU *demos* as such, e.g. the identification of the EU population with the EU as a polity, is present. Moreover, the EU is neither at the beginning of its democratisation but is – despite its democratic deficits – the best developed example of a democratically organized political entity on a transnational level.

## Chicken or Egg? The No-Demos-Thesis

Because of this normative relation between identity-formation and democratisation, many earlier contributions on EU democratisation have underlined that a mere democratisation of EU institutions (like an *improvement* of the competences of the European Parliament) will not be sufficient. In this context, German contributions underline that there are two approaches with respect to the processes that can or will lead to EU identity formation. First, adherents of the *no-demos-thesis* (Weiler 1995) claim that the EU does not show a democratic identity of the population, a European public space, or a European Civil Society. These are seen as pre-conditions for EU democratisation by the defenders of the *no-demos-thesis*. Thus, for them, a further democratisation of the EU would be not only unwise but could be dangerous from a normative point of view (see e.g. Scharpf 1999; Kielmannsegg 2003).

The *no-demos-thesis* postulates a certain, normatively binding succession in time of *demos*-building and democratisation. In this sense it implies a formula that claims democratisation to follow *demos*-building. The *no-demos-thesis* assumes a pre-political identity as a *condition* for the further democratisation of the EU.

The opposing approach claims that this postulate has to be declined. First, the succession in time of *demos*-building and identity formation is not necessary from a normative point of view, because democratic identity as well as a European Public Space or a European Civil Society can and probably will develop within (representative) democratic institutions and democratic practice. It is democratic citizenship that enables this development (see e.g. Habermas 2005; Lepsius 1999). Second, as will be argued in more detail below, pre-political identities do not exist. The comparative look at historical *demos*-building processes shows that a succession in time of identity formation happening first and democratisation following simply never occurred in practice in the simplified way suggested by the defenders of the *no-demos-thesis*. Furthermore, the *no-demos-thesis* is circular, because it implies a permanent repetition of negative circumstances that must forever hinder *demos*-building.

To sum up: the *no-demos-thesis* is too simplified, because *demos*-building-processes are far more complex and are in mutual dependencies between institutional components and different aspects of democratic practice. But the discussion that has been briefly sketched underlines four decisive components of a *demos*: democratic

identity, a European Public Space, a European Civil Society and democratic citizenship.

The two approaches mentioned disagree on two points: first, on the question if a European *demos* will or can develop, because they disagree, second, on the presumed ways in which it could develop. Whereas the *no-demos-thesis* claims the ideal of a succession in time of *demos*-building and democratisation which has been discussed and declined, the more constructivist and deliberative approach is based on the idea that *demos*-building and identity formation will be going hand in hand with the development of democratic practice. This approach has proven to be a) normatively and b) empirically justified.

The relation of EU *demos* and identity formation and EU democratisation now can be summed up as follows: Importantly, democratic identity (as well as a European Public Space and a European Civil Society) can (and probably will) further develop through democratic practice on the EU level. It can be assumed that the development of the *demos*-elements citizenship, identity, public space and civil society will be mutually interdependent.

## European Identity, Democracy and Difference

To further conceptualise European identity normatively, one idea from newer democratic theory is highly relevant (on the following see in detail Wiesner 2014; Wiesner 2018): Democratic identity has to be respectful of difference, because otherwise the collective patterns of identifications and values can offend individual identities in multiple ways. This means that democracies have to be respectful of differences concerning race, class, gender, religion or culture (see e.g. Habermas 2005; Taylor 1993; Benhabib 1996).

This premise easily results in tensions between individual and collectively shared patterns of values or identifications. Two examples from the German public debate in the recent years illustrate these problems: the first concerns the question whether fundamentalist Christians should be allowed to prevent their children from going to school, which normally is compulsory. The second concerns the question whether Muslim women should be allowed to wear headscarves in doing public office. In cases like these it soon comes to debating or deciding if individual values or collectively shared values should be prevalent. In the case of the fundamentalist parents the tension was obvious and clearly recognizable: with respect to their individual values

they claimed their right to educate their children themselves whereas the collective value, laid down in the German constitution, is that school has to be compulsory as it plays an important role in education for democracy. In the case of the Muslim women wearing headscarves while doing public office, the sources of tension were more complicated: it proved difficult to find an unequivocal public position, because Christian nuns were allowed to wear their nun clothes while doing public office. There apparently was no good reason to interdict Muslim women from wearing headscarves – at least if one did not want to completely interdict the wearing of religious symbols in public offices, which would have also meant to forbid nuns wearing their special clothes.

Tensions like these between individual and collectively shared values cannot be discussed here in more detail, but it has to be underlined that they teach important lessons for conceptualizing European identity (on the following see in detail Wiesner 2014; Wiesner 2018): Even in relatively well integrated western nation states like Germany, it proves difficult to balance democracy and difference. But the European Union is much more heterogeneous than any of its member states. Therefore, claiming that European identity must enable a minimum set of shared democratic values while preserving a maximum respect of difference is a challenge which will inevitably lead to a considerable number of conflicts: It is probable that there will exist several different opinions on what should even be the range and content of that minimum set.

But from a normative point of view, based on these considerations, I conclude that the EU polity will have to rely on a set of mere political and democratic basic values. The reason is its heterogeneity. The EU is a political community based on 27 different nation states after Brexit, their respective cultures, and their differences. If it wants to succeed in reconciling democracy and difference, its political values must be as neutral as possible regarding these differences. Therefore, neither culture nor religion can be made part of the EU political values base. A model of constitutional patriotism (Habermas 2005) indicates the way to follow. For this, it will probably help that there are already bases for the definition of EU political core values: the European Charter of fundamental rights, the treaties, or the Copenhagen criteria.

After this discussion, I argue that European identity can be further conceptualized as follows: *what is at stake is that the EU population needs to develop a minimum level of identification with regard to the EU polity, and also a minimum set of collectively shared values. Both must guarantee the acceptance of difference, i.e. they must balance democracy and difference.*

## European Identity as Collective Identity

What has been said so far aims at conceptualising an EU-related form of democratic collective identity<sup>1</sup>. But what is collective identity?

To begin with, the term has to be differentiated from an individual's identity (Mead 2005), as it relates to human collectives that show a similarity in at least one dimension (Niethammer 2000: 9–11). The crucial point is that human collectives construct these identities themselves (Habermas 1976: 92). Second, collective identity needs to be distinguished from the concept of social identity. This concept also regards social groups but describes only the individual components of the individual's identification with the group (Tajfel 1978: 63). As will be discussed below, individual orientations are one central part of collective identity, but the patterns of meaning that represent the contents of this identification constitute another one.

This argument is based on the methodological perspective of a moderate holism (Albert 2005: 388–390; Albert 2007: 17–19), arguing that wholes, or macro-phenomena, do exist, and that furthermore macro-phenomena such as norms, institutions and legitimate orders can have causal effects on individuals (Albert 2005: 410). This methodological perspective allows to study the contents behind an individual's identification with a group, i.e., the patterns and constructions of meaning that are related to it. As constructivist research on nationalism has shown, people identify with a group, or a developing nation state, not without a reason, but precisely because they link this group or nation state to certain patterns of meaning (Anderson 2006: 53). Popper terms these patterns of meaning „*products of the human mind*“ (Popper 1978: 144).

A further point to be emphasised is that collective identities are socially constructed: they are in continuous change, they are complex, and they are influenced by different types and patterns of belonging. This is why constructivist research on nationalism has been criticising the theoretical and methodological perspective that regards collective identities as closed and static. Authors such as Benedict Anderson (Anderson 2006), Ernest Gellner (Gellner 1983), and Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm 2008) have researched the construction of collective identities. Their results can be summed up in the following points (Thadden 1991):

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<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking this is hence an EU identity and not a „European identity“, even if the notion will be used, as it is the one that is usually used in the debate.



- First, collective identities are neither natural and inevitable, nor pre-political. They are socially constructed.
- Second, collective identities are neither static nor stable. They must be regarded as narratives that are historically changing.
- Third, democracies are not related to a homogenous people. They are based on heterogeneous societies that consist of multiple different groups and interests.
- Fourth, while they often, and in practice, relate to countries – or regions-, collective identities do not need to be linked to fixed geographical areas.
- Fifth, collective identities are neither simple nor monolithic. They are always complex and express belongings on all levels of human existence.
- Sixth, and accordingly, the concept “collective identity” is to be understood in the sense that collectively shared memories, values and identifications always are a part of individual identity (Langenohl 2000).

This, I conclude, means that collective identity should rather be termed a collective pattern of individual identifications than a collective identity. These collective patterns of individual identifications or shared values are socially constructed. Therefore, my argument is that when researching European identity, one ought to first research its individual components – values and identifications, and second, one can also research their social construction. Research results stemming from both areas will be presented next.

## The Empirical Conceptualization of European Identity

Based on what has been said so far, the state of the art in research on European identity<sup>2</sup> can be grouped into different strands and subfields (on the following see in detail Wiesner 2014). First, individualist research designs are influenced by Easton’s categories and analyse EU identity quantitatively (see e.g. Westle 2003; Fuchs, Roger, and Magni-Berton 2009; Kaina 2009; Duchesne 2008; M. Castano 2004; Herrmann and Brewer 2004; Bruter 2005). As research in this subfield primarily

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that most items and indicators used in this strand of research have been developed for nation states and national identity rather than with regard to the EU. Therefore it has been critically discussed as to what extent they are also useful to measure European identity (Duchesne 2008; Bruter 2005: XII; Kaina 2009; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009: 10).

regards individual orientations it can be also said that that it focuses primarily on *EU citizens*. Core findings are:

1. Identification and support: until the sovereign debt crisis, and as well after the worst of the crisis was over, Eurobarometer state that roughly half of the EU citizens identify themselves with the EU in the sense that they name themselves as “EU citizens“. When we look at items such as support for EU membership, the percentages are even higher (European Commission, see in detail Wiesner 2014). But first, these percentages vary considerably from one member state to another, and second, citizens of different member states associate different characteristics and contents with the EU (Kaina 2009: 101–107).
2. Factors influencing EU identification: positive everyday experience (Schmidberger 1998) has a positive effect on EU identification, whereas unemployment and economic problems have a negative effect (Immerfall and Sobisch 1997). In general, individuals identify more with the EU if they have a positive image of it (Pichler 2005; Kaina 2009: 112–115).
3. Group variations: The higher the degree of education and wealth of a person, the more probable that this person will identify with the EU, and the more a person expects personal benefits, the more probable that he/she will support the EU (Pichler 2005).
4. The relation of EU and national identity is unclear: Different authors (see e.g. Westle 2003; Opp 2005; Castano 2000; Jiménez et al. 2004; Arts and Halman 2006; McLaren 2004) have analysed whether EU and national identifications are complementary or contradictory. The results are far from clear: in some cases authors found contradictions, in others harmony. One explanatory thesis is that those differences are based in different national contexts (Westle 2003: 474–76).

In the macro approaches, contents and patterns of meaning come into focus. While some contributions are grounded on normative arguments (Habermas 2004; Cerutti 2009; Meyer 2009; Delanty 1999), others focus on the conceptual level (Bauböck, Mokre, and Weiss 2003; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009; Pollack 2008; Lepsius 1999). Empirically, contributions that consider the macro level focus on *EU elites*. Research results can be summed up like this:

1. National and European identity constructions are related: Supporting the quantitative results, research found that these relationships can be positively and negatively loaded (see, e.g., Weiss 2003; Marcussen et al. 2001; Schmidt 2006).
2. There are similarities to the construction processes of national identities: EU identity construction relates on institutions, constructions of otherness and

founding myths (see e.g. Puntsher-Riekman and Wodak 2003; Lepsius 1999; Pantel 1999).

3. Elites have a central role: In the discourse construction of European identity elites indeed have a central role (see e.g. Diez Medrano 2009; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009; Kaelble 2009; Schmidt 2006; Weiss 2003; Banchoff 1999; Seidendorf 2007). But politicians and bureaucrats on both EU and national level often construct different versions and contents for EU identity.
4. National EU conceptions: The different elite discourses created different national EU concepts that differ according to their origins, main themes, and directions. Those national EU concepts can be more or less stable and have to fit with the interests of the national elites (see e.g. Baasner 2008; Banchoff 1999; Diez 1999; Diez Medrano 2003; Hörber 2006; Jachtenfuchs 2002; Larsen 1997; Marcussen et al. 2001; Schmidt 2006; Seidendorf 2007; Waever 2005). This means that these elite EU concepts can construct either harmonious, ambivalent or contradictory relations between European and national identities.
5. Low impact of EU citizens: Citizens are rarely involved in the construction processes of EU identity (Diez Medrano 2009).

In sum research demonstrates that the contents of European identity, the patterns of meaning associated to the EU, are fought over. Discourses in the EU, therefore, play a central role in the social construction of EU identity as they are key means of constructing and transporting meanings for the EU. Discourses, hence, can influence the social construction of identities in the sense of patterns of meaning. But the main level where these EU discourses take place is the nation state. National EU discourses are a central means of constructing meanings on what it means to be European and hence for constructing European identity.

## European Identity: a Working Definition

In this section the conclusions regarding the two questions that formed the base of this article will be summed up. First, what has to be understood by European identity?

To sum up the working definition: European identity from a normative point of view signifies the self-identification of the EU *demos*. In practice, European identity development means the development a minimum level of identification of the EU population and a minimum set of collectively shared values about the EU polity.

Values as well as patterns of identification must guarantee the acceptance of difference (this is a normative condition). European identity will have a character of its own in the sense that it will be a multilevel identity comprising different national models of identification. Nevertheless, European identity development will be similar to the one of national identity in the sense that it develops in discourses, can be influenced by socioeconomic factors and structures, and is related to the definition of an 'Other' for the EU and the reference to founding myths, such as the idea that Europe is founded on the principle of peace, that it is connected to the values of enlightenment or that it needs to be opposed to China and the US (see Wiesner and Schmidt-Gleim 2014).

## European Union Democratisation and European Identity Formation: an Outlook

The second conclusion concerns the relation between EU democratisation and EU identity formation. It has been said that European identity is not a *precondition* of EU democratisation, but that identity is what defines a *demos*, and that the existence of a *demos* is a normative condition for a democratic system that can be considered fully developed. Therefore, European identity is one part of this normative *condition*. The syllable 'pre' indicates a decisive normative as well as methodological difference: Since European Identity is not a pre-condition for EU democratisation, but a condition for a sufficiently successful democratisation process, European identity does not have to exist *before* further EU democratisation can start, but the degree of development of a European Identity will be an indicator for the *quality of the EU democratisation process*. The democratisation process therefore can well go on without having a strong European Identity today – but from a normative point of view it should get stronger over time.

Following what was said before, if the institutional system of the EU were further democratized, and the EP gained full parliamentary competences, this should increase the chances of European identity to develop. But if EU democratisation would go on without a European identity developing further, it would stay weak in that it would then entail a passive *demos*, including citizens that maybe go to elections, but do not identify much with the polity they are voting on, and therefore will probably not show much other political activity. Since democracy from a normative point of view must consist not only of rights to vote or democratic institutions, but also of democratic practice, EU democratisation in this case indeed would stay weak. It also has to be

said that every political activity directed to the EU will actively contribute not only to the development of an active *demos*, but also a European identity and to stronger democratisation.

Having said so, the perspectives for strengthening European identity do not seem bad. There are already some elements of European identity existing, and it is well possible that they will develop further within democratic practice in the EU and a growing – hopefully positive – day-to-day experience of the EU. But to which degree an EU identity will develop and in which way, will also depend on factors that can hardly be influenced by institutions.

Will the differences concerning values existing currently in the EU – like between secular states and states with a state religion – diminish, will a consent on minimum common values be reached, or will a proper European political culture of difference and mutual acceptance develop? Or, on the other hand, will existing value differences increase, and maybe even become sources of conflict? The current debates on migration indicate a potential for conflict.

What will the role of the national governments and the media be? Will they become advocates of a democratic European integration, inform the citizens about Europe, and therefore help create areas for public exchange within the different member states? Or will they abstain from talking about Europe, let alone be its advocates, or even publish populist statements against the so-called Brussels bureaucracy and the like? In the current EU, there are both governments and media that support European integration and others that strongly argue against it, but there also is a broad range in between – so the effects of their interventions are different as well.

Will mutual recognition and acceptance between the European citizens develop? Already, citizens of the EU for a majority of the EU population are no longer seen as real foreigners, but will they start more and more to define citizens from other member states as Europeans like them, and will they even start to recognize that Finnish fishermen have the same right to receive EU subventions as Greek olive planters, and vice-versa? Again, at the moment, we see examples of both dynamics.

All in all, what has been discussed underlines that European identity is, and will remain, a social construct. This means that the ways in which it will further develop, the character it will take on, and also the strengths – or weakness – it will show, depend on what we, the citizens of the EU, and also the EU's politicians and media, make it.

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