



LET'S TALK ABOUT EUROPEAN IDENTITY

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Introduction:

Gustav Suits, one of Estonian's greatest poets and a leader of a 20th century movement called The Young Estonians, has said: Let's remain Estonians, but also become Europeans. "(Süvalep 2003) It seems that at least for Estonians it has been important to be part of the great Europe and its identity for a long time, while remaining as independent as possible. We as a small country have always needed and wanted to be part of some bigger system to be taken seriously and to be protected against bigger and more powerful actors. We have been quite successful in that. But how is it with other states in Europe and the people living in them - Europeans? Is there such a thing as a common European identity that drives people? If not, then is it possible to achieve it in the future and how can it be done?

Europeans and European Identity:

"Everyone from the continent of Europe is European. However, when asked to say what they are, almost no one of the continent of Europe would first say that they are European. What is meant by European identity and what could be the common culture and traditions of historical experiences that set "Europe" apart". (Palaskas.a.1) As we can see, people living in the continent are Europeans just as people living in African continent are Africans. We might not bring it up as a first characteristic about ourselves, but it is a fact. Europe itself can be considered a landmass on which the countries share a somewhat common history, unified economy and similar human society (Jospin2001).

On the other hand, it is suggested that Europeans are people that come from the highest socioeconomic groups, such as the business owners, managers, professionals and other white-collar workers. They are involved in business and government, travel a lot in Europe and live in other European countries. (Fligstein, 2008; Risse, 2010) Considered Europeans are also young people that travel across European countries' borders for school, tourism and work. People with higher income are more likely to travel and hence participate in the diverse cultural life across Europe. (Fligstein, Polyakova *et al.* 2012: 109, 110). This point of view rather suggests that Europeans are looked upon as individual people or smaller groups of people in European countries rather than big communities that are divided by characteristics with wider range such as common history or economy.

There are four concepts that many of the studies about European identity consists of and that I find important to bring out: the European identity and the identification with Europe, Europeanisation, transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. Identity is more about an individual being, but also holds a collective component, because individuals orient themselves to one or more groups and collectives. Identity cannot be examined apart from one or multiple subjects such as individuals or collectives, ethnicities, demos or wider communities that are the essence of identities and define it (Palaskas. a. 2). Europeanisation refers to a trend similar to globalization, but as a peripheral variant. Transnationalism refers to a cross-border living that people of Europe can practise, while maintaining their social existence in both, the country of residence and the country of origin. Cosmopolitanism refers to actively seeking out and appreciating contact with other cultures and hence coincides with well-known European values of tolerance and equality. (Miller 2012: 2)

I think that the idea and issues with the European identity became evident when establishing the European Union. It was then that the image of Europe changed and with that also people's identity in European and national level (Miller 2012:7). One of the leading scholars of European integration, Ernst Haas (1961), formulated a theory of regional integration. He thought that co-operation would lead to more co-operation and more supranational rule-making. As authority shifted to Brussels, more actors would engage in the integration process. Firms, governments, political parties and citizens would concentrate their behaviour toward the EU. At first his theory did not work, but in the mid 1980's it finally took off with establishing the Schengen Agreement, the single market and so on. (Fligstein, Polyakova *et al.* 2012: 106, 107)

Creating Common European Identity:

It is clear that individuals possess multiple identities and can grow strong bonds with more than one community and collective space (Miller 2012: 2). It remains unexplored to what extent the relations between those identities go and is there any hierarchy between them. (Palaskas. a. 4) It has to be thoroughly examined how people can express their identities in a European level. There has been carried out some surveys to find out how people feel about belonging to Europe and if they feel European by Michael Bruter (2004) and it turned out that people feel connected to their own states as well as to Europe. People also seemed to be quite knowledgeable about European Union and its institutions. This shows that people indeed can have multiple

identities, furthermore, these identities not only co-exist but also overlap according to the situation. (Miller 2012: 7, 8)

National identities consist of certain elements like collective memory, religion, language, borders (Palaskas.a.4). However, Europe as a whole has not obtained these elements, these have always been divided across the states. Maybe about the religion we can say that at one point Europe was mostly Christian and this was something that identified Europeans.

‘Unity in diversity’ is something that can summarize Europe. It is diverse in nations but is united under common values and principles. (Mihelj, Koenig *et al.* 2008: 285) Everyone wants peace, fruitful economy, good relations with other states, have a say in international decisions and so on. Nowadays all of the states have to fight with aging population and need to take steps against it. Also, democracy seems to be something that most of the state practice and value. As for the principles, most of the world’s states, including Europe, have agreed to certain treaties, for example regarding human rights, armed conflicts *etc.* However, it seems that Europe has reached their maximum capacity of diversities if we for example think about Turkey that has been wanting to join the EU for years but has not been able to due to several shortcomings. It may be considered as violation of the principle of equal treatment on normative and ethical grounds (Aydın-Düzgit 2012: 170)

Migration, the changing role of nation-states and reshaping of boundaries in several levels are definitely some of the aspects that contribute to the changing and forging of European identity. (Raento 2008: 347) At the same time I. Vassilis Nitsiakos says that the unification of Europe cannot happen unless a cultural convergence is promoted and with that a supranational collective consciousness is created. It would facilitate transnational communications and co-existence. She suggests that European institutions should promote collective activities and promote collective mentality, which would be the base for a new identity that would transcend national differences. (2004: 23) I agree with her in the idea that in order to forge and shape the European identity, the initiative should come from above to guide it in the right way. Since Europe for me is a somewhat ‘forcefully’ put together community, it has to also be ‘forced’ in the right direction in its decisions as well. The common European identity would also justify the political and economic unification (Vassilis Nitsiakos 2004: 24).

Formation of a European identity will not cause replacing of national identities. “Supporting the possibility of coexistence of the two forms of identities, we can notice that European cultural identity is forged using the same rhetoric as in the case of nation-state”. It has its myths, memories, symbols and tries to create a sense of continuity through a common history, a shared present and future, and that is similar to national identity discourses. (Irina 2012: 22)

Concluding Thoughts:

As can be drawn from the essay, ‘European’ can mean that a person is living in the continent of Europe. It does not matter in which state of the continent but being a European is simply a fact when living here. It can also mean a person that is involved in Europe’s social, political and cultural life in multiple levels and contributes to them in some ways. As for the European identity, can be said that it does exist in the form of common values and principles and in order to pursue it further, some decisions need to be made by higher powers to unify and promote collective consciousness in Europe.

I personally am not a fan of the common European identity and calling myself a European. I much prefer calling myself an Estonian living in Europe. The main concern of mine is that although many European countries are part of for example European Union, they still rather pursue their own interests than make decisions that would benefit everyone. How can one be sure that the decision is made bearing collective benefits in mind? Bigger countries’ voice is heard more. I, as a citizen of a small country, feel endangered. Not only because of not being heard, but also because I do not believe that European identity can be made without interrupting and changing the national identity as was suggested by D. Irina (2012). With the borders being open, the information being very accessible via Internet and globalization happening we are inevitably losing ourselves and our national identity. I would prefer to protect what little we still have left, but at the same time I do understand that as time goes on, changes happen and it is simply the way life is.

I would also like to bring out an idea that people living in Europe do not necessarily think of Europe as one big entity but do think like that for example about the US or Africa. At the same time, people from the US or Africa think of Europe as a whole, and themselves as being from different parts of the US or Africa. They might not like being said having the US identity or the African identity, because they see themselves as more than that. Every person has a deep connection to much smaller community than something as large as a collection of states. I have never heard a person from Africa say that they are from Africa. They always say which African state they are from and that shows that it is common to identify yourself with your community and its identity rather than one big collective identity.

To conclude, I can see that a common European identity is present now more than ever, since all the young generations are used to being part of Europe and hearing about European Union, thinking of themselves as being European as well as a citizen of a European state. Globalization and Europeanisation certainly help a lot in achieving the common identity. However, as long as the individual states exist, I do not see them pursuing

a common European identity, I rather see a close co-existing and keeping of good relations but preserving national identities as it is something that defines us.

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