

EUROPEAN IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALISATION

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Identity and defence were the two key issues debated during the events hosted by the Jacques Delors Institute in Paris on 6 and 7 October 2016, lying at the heart of the speeches delivered by European Commission President [Jean-Claude Juncker](#), by French President [François Hollande](#) and by French Prime Minister [Manuel Valls](#).

While the 2nd debate of the [annual meeting on 7 October 2016](#) of our [European Steering Committee](#) dealt with [European collective security identity](#), the 1st one proceeded with a discussion on European identity in the context of globalisation, starting with the internal perception offered by Margrethe Vestager, the European commissioner for competition, and the external perception illustrated by Lakhdar Brahimi, former Algerian minister for foreign affairs and a former high representative of the United Nations, in the course a debate introduced by Pascal Lamy. This synthesis presents the main analysis and recommendations put forward by the [participants](#), under Chatham House Rule.

Even the very fact of whether or not it was appropriate to debate such an issue at this time triggered a debate among the committee members. In view of the profoundly troubled moment that the EU is going through with Brexit, with the collective response to the influx of refugees and with the rise of populism, all of which are challenges to European solidarity, the issue of European identity was judged, to be either not a priority or, on the contrary, of crucial importance for drawing the man in the street back to the European project. This debate reflects the malaise currently aroused by the issue of identity and of belonging at a time when it is being used on the national level for questionable political ends. But the focus on the issue in the speeches given by [Jean-Claude Juncker](#), [François Hollande](#) and [Manuel Valls](#) to mark the Jacques Delors Institute's 20th anniversary on 6 and 7 October 2016, highlights the growing concern over the future of European identity.

It was in the 1990s, while preparing the substantial enlargement made possible by the end of the Cold War, that introverted Europe, which had focused up until then on its own internal construction, engaged in a Copernican revolution that prompted it to ask itself questions regarding its place and its role in the world and simultaneously to start promoting a European identity. So does the concern that the issue is arousing again today reflect a new turning point in the European project? While numerous voices agree

on underscoring the fact that we are moving away from the construction of a United States of Europe, endeavouring to determine “what kind of Europe we wish to head towards” requires that we define the identity that we wish to bear in the world. This synthesis reviews the salient points that fuelled the exchange of views in the course of the debate.



1. European identity faces the definition test

Just how aware are we that we are European? Answering this question demands that we look both at what characterises Europe (in terms of its cultural legacy) and at the identity of the European Union (in the sense of the political and institutional project).

Europe's identity was forged on the battlefield over the centuries, in the course of the major wars that ravaged the continent. This identity is a product of the long history of a journey towards a civilisation based on the search for coexistence and on the management of diversity. It differentiates, but the notion of identity is indeed not necessarily homogeneous. It can be diverse. European identity is therefore based first and foremost on the defence of those values that guarantee respect for diversity, be it cultural or religious, and that guarantee both equal rights for men and women and the rights of minorities (including religious minorities). Europe's legacy is made up of democracy and, together with democracy, of Christian secularism: in other words, of a temporal, spiritual and intellectual differentiation that guarantees freedom of conscience and of expression. Nowhere else in the world is there such strong determination to respect those values. Besides, there is no other region in the world where women enjoy a better life than in Europe.

But are these values our own? Are they Western? Or does the concept of human rights not, rather, imply that they are an asset shared by the whole of mankind and thus that they should be built into the construction of the United Nations? Such questions reveal the difficulty in fostering a strong sense of belonging in citizens on the basis of values claimed as universal. Yet in addition to recent developments in the world reminding us that such values are in fact far from universally subscribed to or even embodied in numerous countries' constitutional frameworks, European identity is based also on the European peoples' ambitious goal of building a social market economy.

It is part of our European ethical narrative to defend the argument that it is possible to do something good for oneself while at the same time avoiding leaving the weaker members of society in the lurch, be they elderly, sick or simply devoid of resources. Human dignity is not just a safety net. Individuals must have the right to equality of opportunity. Human society is not built solely on rights but also on protection.

In addition to being a cultural legacy, Europe is a regulatory space. It is a political and an institutional project. Human beings need to have something that they can not only talk about together but also work on together and build together. Nor can that be restricted to concrete projects spawned solely by common interests. That is not enough. The "lead of economic interest" does not turn into "political

gold" at the drop of a hat. A social pact's ambition is stronger than that; it rests on the will to live together in order to achieve something together. Thus, for instance, it proved possible to sign the Paris climate agreement in twenty-seven days because it rode on the back of European cohesion and determination. The European social pact should also concern itself more extensively with the struggle against terrorism and against tax evasion, not to say with the quest for an inclusive society.



2. European identity's external influence

The reconstruction of Europe after two World Wars attracted the admiration of outside observers. The unity forged by the Founding Fathers was designed to serve the people because it was based on the rights of the individual, on social justice, on peace and on stability - all values that simply did not exist in a large part of the rest of the world. This common enterprise shared by the peoples of Europe has set a particularly important example on the world stage. European integration has been a source of inspiration for such regional integration projects as ASEAN, even though that is of course a far cry from the EU, while in Africa this aspiration to unity has led to the establishment of the African Union.

Yet there is a growing gap between the European model as proclaimed and its reality. Rising individualism and materialism are starting to prevail over the values proclaimed and thus to undermine the attractiveness of European identity in the eyes of certain people, particularly to the south of the Mediterranean. The pressure or conditionality wielded by the Europeans in their cooperation with third countries, or in some cases the Europeans' failure to mobilise outside their borders, are perceived as inconsistent with the human rights that Europe claims to defend.

The outreach of European values based on human rights is also less well perceived when it turns into the kind of “human rights-ism” that rejects certain values proper to other cultures in the world, be they in Asia or in Africa. Missions taking Europeans to third countries must also, in addition to humanitarian intervention, be accompanied by greater involvement and responsibility in the drive to stabilise those countries (Libya, Afghanistan and so forth). The Europeans have promoted international justice but there is still a long way to go before the International Criminal Court is recognised by the international community as a whole. Europe’s economic clout is having a hard time translating into political influence.

3. European identity as a responsibility

The awareness of being European is a priority which must be striven for. In order to forge a sense of belonging to Europe as a complement to citizens’ sense of national identity, greater intercultural penetration among European countries is of the essence. The same European history is not taught in schools, and the Europeans also lack a common language. Learning English is not sufficient for them to acquire common cultural benchmarks. Greater cultural penetration in terms of an awareness of what is going on in other European countries entails first and foremost an increase in mobility, which can be encouraged by the Erasmus pro project designed to facilitate the acquisition of professional training in countries other than one’s own country of origin.

Czech philosopher Jan Sokkol pointed out that one does not deserve what one receives. One receives it as a legacy simply because those who went before us did not give up: it is our ancestors who committed to keeping it alive. Their commitment not to unravel the legacy they received and to ensure that it would prosper strikes a particularly strong note in the context both of Brexit and of the failure to

comply with Europe’s basic democratic principles in Hungary and in Poland. We cannot allow these values to slip through our fingers and allow the populists to unravel them. Our words must translate into actions. We must reject the illiberal democracy of Victor Orbán and defend pluralism, without which Europe would lose touch with reality: it would lose its relevance.

Václav Havel’s protest speech addressed to the government in power twenty years ago strikes a particularly appropriate note in this context: “One often associates identity with fear, as though it were a non-negotiable, almost genetic inevitability related to blood that is beyond our control, that is out of our reach, and we try to do everything possible to control and to safeguard it. In my view, identity is an exploit, an act. It is the very expression of our human responsibility”.

The European project binds us in what we do. And this responsibility to ensure that the European project lives on is all the stronger in that it calls on us to keep alive a “third way” between those of the United States and of China, to keep alive a model that can become a focal point for the emerging economies.

Encouraging and defending European identity requires political leadership, a leadership which must come across clearly when fear of refugee influxes or of illegal migrants, which takes hold even in those areas where they are few in number, strengthens the myth of national borders. To live up to this responsibility, the first thing we need to do is to improve the way in which we explain what is happening and to ensure stronger cohesion at the European level.

Thus Europe’s current crisis could well be seen as what Václav Havel called “an invitation once again to act and to impart meaning to our identity” in order to send out a message to the world.



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