

Identity Construction and the Success of a European Identity in the European Union

Hannah Fereshtekhou

University of Cincinnati

Introduction

Societies and cultures do not exist in a vacuum and their decisions are not made under such conditions either. Reality is much more complex, where cultural ties, shared histories, and common interests drive decision making in the global political sphere. In order to better understand the motivations behind different state actors and what drives them, it is important to understand the framework in which they view themselves. In that way, understanding how citizens, nations, and states construct their identities is crucial. Understanding national identity and the profound way in which it interacts with other imaginings of geopolitical identities will continue to be relevant “as long as most of the world’s trade, production and consumption is still organized in terms of relations between sovereign (if increasingly interdependent) national states,” (Smith, 1992). Furthermore, with the specific framework of analysis of this paper being European states, understanding the composition of various identities and how they interact with each other, whether that is competing or coexisting, is vital to determining the potential success of the European Union (EU)—a question which is still relevant as the EU continues to expand, and has to deal with various crises facing their collective union, from the strength of the Euro to the mass migration crisis. The legitimacy and viability of a supranational, European identity will be determined both by how successfully it is constructed, as well as by how that identity is able to be incorporated into current conceptions of national and subnational identities.

Framework

What components and mechanisms go into constructing these various levels of geopolitical identities? Can these identities coexist, or does one have to be deconstructed or eroded in order for the other to exist? Does the existence of a European identity inherently mean the destruction of national identities? Discussion with the presenter we had the opportunity to

speaking with at the European Commission who asked that his name not be used stated that as long as member states act with the priority to protect their national interests first then there will certainly continue to be tension. That does appear to be the case; as long as the different conceptions of identities compete over similar mechanisms (e.g., education, cultural, political, legal), then tension will exist between the warring identities. While there are theories for how identities can coexist and how those tensions can be resolved, there are those who contest that only a single identity can exist for a collective group at one time. Examples of this perspective are those that believe that Europe is “too diffuse, too incomparable,” (Marácz and Versteegh, 2010) to be able to reconcile the vast cultural differences of the EU member states in order to create a successful European identity. Others contend that the existence of a supranational identity created through European integration “facilitates the flourishing of diverse national identities rather than convergence around a single homogenous European identity,” (Cram, 2009). That is to say that a supranational identity such as a European identity will be allowed to coexist, and may even be welcomed, as it creates context and space for national or subnational identities to be heard.

In order to examine identity and its construction there needs to be a framework established so that one may make observations and comparisons among its varying levels and structures. “Identity” in and of itself can be broken down into numerous nuanced parts and continuums. At its core, a “collective cultural identity” as Smith (1992) explains it can be thought of as having three basic components. First, there is a sense of continuity of experiences from generation to generation. Second, there exists a connection to shared memories of the history belonging to the particular cultural group. Third, within the group there exists a common purpose or destiny in which individuals believe. He notes that these three representative aspects

of a cultural identity are subjective and need only be perceived as present to members of the group. With that as the foundation for understanding and conceptualizing collective cultural identities, history and society have established the creation of numerous identities, ranging from, but not limited to, identification by tribe, gender, age, religion, and region. As global populations increase and globalization becomes more pervasive, national identities become increasingly relevant and powerful, going so far as to be “transcending other loyalties in scope and power,” (Smith, 1992). Part of understanding the extensiveness of national identity comes from the distinction between individual and collective identities that Smith goes on to explain. Identity at the level of the individual can be more flexible and situational, whereas the pervasiveness and persistence of a collective identity comes from being reinforced by those in political power (Smith, 1992).

With this understanding, the construction and existence of national identity provides the focal point and foundation for tensions across the spectrum of geopolitical identities. The other overarching identities that exist in contest are supranational and subnational (i.e., regional or peripheral) identities. Even with acknowledging the persistence of national identities due to their collective nature, “[people] have *multiple* identities. These identifications may reinforce national identities or cross-cut them,” (Smith, 1992). In order to better understand these intricacies and interactions, these identities will be examined in the cases of various member states of the European Union. Specifically, in the circumstance of Spain and its autonomous regions of Catalonia and Basque Country which exhibits the tensions between national and subnational identities, as well as how, surprisingly, the third competing supranational identity may be welcomed as a way for the state to consolidate its identity. Also, in the case of the United Kingdom (UK) and its region of Northern Ireland consisting of subnational identities of Ulster

Unionists and Northern Irish Nationalists represents another instance of national and subnational tension. Interestingly in this case, however, the supranational identity provided by the EU is instead of interest to the subnational parties as a way to gain legitimacy and decentralize central state power. Yet, in order to understand how the three geopolitical identities being examined interact, it is first necessary to understand their foundations and how they are constructed.

National Identity

There has been much scholarly debate regarding national identity and its construction, however there are a number of mechanisms and characteristics that appear consistently throughout the literature. A critical, though arguably technical, distinction that must be kept in mind is that between what is referred to as a “nation” versus that of a “state.” The state is a legal entity and institution. It is concerned with power and sovereignty over its land and its corresponding population of people and it also has legal and constitutional legitimacy (Habermas, 1998). A nation, on the other hand, is a social concept arising from the sense of a shared common culture, including “myths, memories, symbols and traditions,” (Smith 1992). The concepts of a state and nation, however, are used virtually interchangeably as they are inherently and inexorably interrelated. According to Cinpoes (2008), the state is meant to represent the nation politically and achieve goals relevant to the national interest. What makes the concepts more difficult to separate is the way in which they are entwined. In today’s modern state, the shared culture that connects a nation relies upon and is reinforced through state institutions such as national languages, standardized education, and mass media (Cinpoes, 2008). This relationship demonstrates the unavoidable connection for the nation-state, as the political state derives legitimacy from the cultural nation it must represent. However, as especially Europe has seen, the state can be and is made up of many different cultural and ethnic communities that

do not lend themselves to being labeled as one nation. This diversity can lead to conflicting interests and viewpoints due to the manifestation of competing identities. In order to avoid this and maintain unity, states must now “aspire to become at least ‘national states’ with a common public culture open to all citizens,” (Smith, 1992). In these ethnically diverse communities, states can only gain legitimacy by representing all communities in a unifying way, while still being cognizant to their diversity.

While the distinction is nuanced, it is important to recognize the difference between the state and the nation, as this difference becomes amplified, as will be seen later, with the rise of subnational identities. With regard to national identity, however, the distinction becomes important in order to understand how first and foremost, “national identity is a type of collective identity that gives allegiance to the nation,” (Cinpoes, 2008). Fundamental to the construction of a nation’s identity are markers that should exist in the collective population, such as “sharing a historic territory, or homeland, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members,” (Smith 1991). To take steps in strengthening the loyalties to the nation, the myths, symbols, culture, and shared history that create both the community of a nation and national identity are often created and controlled through a top-down process of nationalist elites who essentially write the narrative through various institutions (Breuilly, 1996).

Supranational Identity

The development of a supranational identity, such as a European identity, should, theoretically, merely follow a similar process as the development of a national identity. Such a supranational identity is necessary in order to establish legitimacy of the EU as a political body and of its institutions (Bruter, 2005).

In establishing that identity, the EU should only need to find ways to satisfy the checklist of characteristics related to national identity in order to successfully create a supranational identity. However, for better or worse, it is difficult for a number of these attributes to be met. Regarding Smith's (1991) fundamental markers, the number of languages across the continent and the nebulous nature of Europe's borders make it difficult to determine a population to call Europeans. Legal systems and cultures also vary across member states. Shared memories and history are also difficult to pinpoint. Even though the spread of various religions and intellectual developmental periods, such as the Enlightenment or the Renaissance, did occur across continental Europe, it reached different states to varying degrees, and some not at all. With no deep roots meaningfully culturally connecting the member states, it may be difficult to envision a top-down approach in which elites are able to use a collective culture to create a supranational identity. The institutions of the EU have tried to create meaningful myths and symbols, as can be seen with the flag, European anthem, and national day, but these may not be enough to invest individuals into the idea of being "European." Rather, Marácz and Versteegh (2010) argue for a bottom-up approach, in which one begins with the citizens and "link[s] the concept of European identity to European citizenship."

This idea of European citizenship being the foundation onto which this supranational identity is built compliments Cram's (2009) concept of banal Europeanism. In essence, it is the idea to create a sense of community among citizens of member states that is not necessarily remarkable or overt, but is instead a feeling that becomes habitual and routine. This can be achieved through "enhabitation", or collective forgetting, in which the concept of a European identity, including "thoughts, reactions and symbols" become normalized and it is forgotten that the present context did not always exist (Billig, 1995). While there may still be tensions as a

result of institutional overlap of the EU and state power, this way of identity formation would not mean to threaten or even override national identities. Rather, in this way a European identity would be a context that “provide[s] opportunities for multiple identities to develop and receive expression,” (Marks, 1999).

Subnational Identity

Similar to tensions between supranational and national identity that stem from globalization and Europeanization, subnational identities can come into conflict with national identities. This can be exacerbated since subnational identities by nature tend to exist in conflict with a central, state supported national identity (Fitjar, 2010). While the formation of a subnational identity could be viewed as a concentrated, microcosm version of national identity formation as it similarly involves a collective identity based upon shared myths, symbols, history, culture, and land (Winstanley, 2007), other factors lend themselves to constructing a subnational identity. Additionally, Fitjar (2010) found subnational identities tend to be stronger when the region does not border a state capital. This distance from the center of the state both literally and figuratively casts the subnational culture in the periphery, which may play a role in increased tension between national and subnational identities. He also found that strength of the regional language and economic development provides strong indications of subnational identity development, as do distinct political parties and greater European integration. This final indicator may initially seem counterintuitive. One would assume that subnational identities would be opposed to a supranational identity potentially imposing its culture and sovereignty upon them when they are already in competition with the state’s national identity. However, as will be seen in the case of Northern Ireland, a European identity provides a framework for subnational identities to retain legitimacy and power.

Identity Interaction

Another way to understand how a supranational identity could benefit and strengthen a subnational identity is to understand the saliency of identities. Individuals at any point may relate to one or more of their identities, and may move between them depending upon the circumstances or the situation. There are a number of theories regarding the frameworks in which identities may coexist or be moved between fluidly, including Diez Medrano and Guittierez's (2001) "nested identities," Laitin's (2001) "layered identities," and Risse's (2003) "marble cake" framework. Recognizing that variability reveals that identities do not necessarily exist in constant conflict or competition. While identity formation has progressed and expanded, humans retain and utilize the ability to relate or be loyal to multiple identities. In that regard, Cram (2009) categorizes the interrelationships and tensions between a European-supranational, national, and subnational identities as contextual in their formation and contingent in their process and allegiance. This will be highlighted in the case studies, which demonstrate how contexts and interests shape the relationships between identities.

Spain, Catalonia, and Basque Country

Regions exist within European countries that have constructed their own peripheral identities tangential to the central state's national identity. As subnational identities obtain recognition and autonomy, they come into more conflict with mechanisms that the state also controls (Keating and Wilson, 2014). These unique situations of autonomous regions that still hold allegiances to the central state provide an opportunity to observe the interactions between European-supranational, national, and subnational identities. One that continues to be examined is the relationship between Spain's national identity and those of its autonomous regions of Catalonia and Basque Country.

By 1898, just before the 20th century, Basque Country and Catalonia had developed as viable subnational identities in Spain. This was a result of political discord in Spain that led to ethnic groups being marginalized, as well as a result of economic successes in these regions due to industrialization. The speed at which these events occurred led to “the failure of Spanish elites to incorporate all sectors of society into the national ideal,” (Muro and Quiroga, 2005). During the following century, movements aiming to oppress these peripheral parties ensued, including severe oppression during the Franco dictatorship from 1939-1975. However, trying to crush the already budding peripheral parties in turn actually served to strengthen and solidify those identities, as they had to come together in order to fend off the threat the state posed to their very existence (Jáuregui, 1986). This process of identity formation meets the qualifications previously identified for a subnational identity. The shared history of oppression, the distinct political parties and languages (Catalonian and Basque), and the distance from the central state all aid in forming distinct and prevailing subnational identities (Winstanley, 2007; Fitjar, 2010).

This history exhibits the tensions that arise when identities are competing for the same mechanisms or institutions, such as language, myths, symbols, and anthems, as well as when there is a direct threat and attempt at suppression of a competing identity. Ultimately, in order to preserve its statehood, Spain has found success in being a “nation of nations” (Nuñez, 2001) in which the regions have autonomy but also are structured around a central Spanish constitution, monarchy, shared culture, and history. The perspective has shifted from one in which national identity and subnational identity must exist in conflict, to one where it is recognized that people can hold multiple identities concurrently. While one would not expect that a state would be willing to decentralize its authority and perhaps dilute its framework for national identity, Martínez-Herrera (2002) notes that the decision has led to a decrease in the number of people in

Basque Country and Catalonia that would not identify with Spanish identity at all. Overall, perhaps counter intuitively, it would seem that decentralizing state power leads to greater national integration, so long as the state remains “responsive, flexible but persevering and tenacious” in its relations and identity development with its peripheral parties (Martínez-Herrera, 2002).

Furthermore, participating in European integration has reinforced the connection of the subnational identities into the collective national identity of Spain. Membership is representative of Spain’s political interests and assists it in being “no longer regarded as a backward-looking and authoritarian state but as a modern, secular and European democracy,” (Muro and Quiroga, 2005). By committing itself to the ideals of European identity and citizenship, that supranational identity legitimizes Spain’s central state power and secures Spain’s framework of its national identity in which its subnational identities are nested. In this way, interestingly, a national government can utilize EU membership and the acceptance of a supranational identity as a way to not erode national identity, but to in fact strengthen it.

United Kingdom and Northern Ireland

With the understanding that identity is multidimensional, contextual, and contingent it is easy to see how the addition of a supranational framework of identity such as one posed by European integration may fundamentally change the construction and interactions of identity. As the EU continues to introduce and develop the overarching context European integration provides, “the EU is slowly redefining existing political arrangements, altering traditional policy networks, triggering institutional change, reshaping the opportunity structures of members states and their major interests,” (Müller & Wright, 1994). This network of interactions can be seen in

the comparative case of British national identity and Ulster Unionist and Northern Irish subnational identities in the UK.

In Britain, there is great support for Euroscepticism due to the imagining of the British national identity. It exhibits the markers of the construction of national identity such as a historically shared homeland with common memories, culture, and legal rights. Its historical construction, however, was not based up an ethno or civic culture, but rather, as Gifford (2006) writes, "Britishness was primarily an imperial identity." The construction of an identity around imperial power stems from a sense of strong nationalism that juxtaposes the center state against an "other." As imperialism itself as a power construct was eroded, the British national identity also faced an existential crisis. As a result, it can be argued that European integration and its perceived threat to the exceptional British national identity actually serve to maintain and solidify the center state's national identity by becoming the next unifying "other" (Gifford, 2006). This demonstrates the contextual and contingent aspect to identity processes, as the geopolitical identities exist in a state of balanced tension. At the same time, a state with a strong national identity, unsurprisingly, fears the deconstruction of that identity, leading to reluctance of Britain to fully enforce EU policy or to wholeheartedly participate in integration (George, 1998), and now such strong Eurosceptic sentiment has even led to the possibility of leaving the EU with the impending referendum.

On the other hand, within the same state with a strong national identity in the central state, exist regions with divisive subnational identities. In Northern Ireland, Ulster Unionists that favor union with the British have a long and bloody history against the Northern Irish Nationalists. While the Northern Irish Nationalist identity may be characterized as a manifestation of a national identity when considered alongside the construction of Irish national

identity in the Republic of Ireland, in the context of being constitutional polities of the UK, these two regions make up subnational identities of the UK (Hayward, 2006). It should be noted that the fluidity and multiplicity of these identities once again demonstrates the contextual and contingent nature of identity.

However, in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict, the starkly contrasting positions of these two subnational identities makes itself apparent in the interactions they have with a supranational European identity. The Ulster Unionists have a culture unique to them compared to that of the Northern Irish, at least based upon their perceptions and discourse. The construction of their subnational identity is based upon a shared history of experiences, myths, and civic and legal rights with a continually south-versus-north dichotomy (Hayward, 2006). Consequently, unionists wish for as little international interference as possible regarding attempts at conflict resolution in Northern Ireland. This is because the presence of international actors such as the EU decentralizes power from the center state in the UK, thus threatening the Ulster Unionist subnational identity and its strong connection to the national identity of its state (Hayward, 2006). Conversely, Northern Irish Nationalists have their own basis for their subnational identity. These opposing identities drive both parties into wholly opposite directions regarding the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Subsequently, Northern Irish Nationalists welcome the presence of the EU for the Structural Funds the entity provides, which benefits the infrastructure and pushes towards independence of the region, as well as for the decentralizing effect it has on the center state through the supranational framework and multilevel system of government (McCall, 1998).

This reality presents a paradoxical situation. Northern Irish Nationalists are a subnational identity of the UK with a strong sense of nationalism, similar to the British sense of

exceptionalism. While the EU itself does not claim to be attempting to deconstruct national identities, nor using the creation of a European identity as a mechanism for identity reconstruction (Hayward, 2006), there is no doubt that it is possible for regional powers to utilize such a geopolitical environment as a possible catalyst for identity reconstruction and shifts in governmental powers. Ultimately, however, this case in which a strong subnational identity sees value in a potentially distant, far-removed supranational identity validates the way in which multiple seemingly competing identities can cohabitate. Rather than being perceived as a threat to strong national or subnational identities and eroding at that nationalistic framework, the development of a supranational identity through European integration offers an avenue for a greater number of identities to be legitimized. This development of multilevel governance is not a move to deconstruct national identity as Eurosceptics fear, but rather a trend towards creating a context that acts “as a positive force for the expression” of the various constructions of identity (Carey, 2002).

Conclusion

There are many components to constructing identity, but in regards to collective identities such as those on a national or supranational level, it is important for there to be a shared homeland, history, culture, economy, and legal rights and duties. This is similarly necessary for the development of a subnational identity, however the strength of this peripheral identity increases with the distinction of language, political parties, distance from the central state, as well as level of European integration. While there is a perspective that contends that these identities are inherently at odds with one another and that the existence of one must mean the erosion or deconstruction of another, the examination of the cases in Spain and the UK reveal that this is not necessarily the reality. The situation in Spain demonstrates an instance in which a

state decentralizing its power and participating in European integration, perhaps counter intuitively, improves its relationship with its subnational identities and legitimizes its national identity through state interests. The case in the UK shows how the British with their pervasive national identity are able to look to and utilize a supranational identity as a unifying force. Additionally, the peripheral parties of Ulster Unionists interestingly do not want interference from a supranational identity as they risk decentralizing the central state power, whereas the Northern Irish Nationalists with a strong, distinct subnational identity in the UK, comparable to that of the British national identity, actually look to European integration as an avenue for legitimacy and independence. In each of these cases, the presence of a supranational identity does not spell doom for the national and subnational identities of the state, but rather maintain a balance of power in the interest of the parties. This mutability of identity demonstrates how different identities can be adopted based upon the situation. In this way, the construction and existence of geopolitical identities do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive, but it can be that “regions and ethnic communities are being revitalized *alongside* a strengthened national state and an over-arching European Community,” (Smith, 1992). Specifically concerning the potential future success of a supranational identity through European integration, that certainly seems possible, although perhaps not through the standard mechanisms of construction discussed previously. Based upon the cases in Spain and Britain, it seems a supranational identity will be welcomed so long as it is in balance with the interests of the existing identities. Therefore, while the nation may still be at the center of decisions and tensions, a construction of a “looser European identity” (Smith, 1992) may find contingent and contextual success among the EUs member states.

References

- Billig, M. (1995). *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Breuilly, J. (1996). Approaches to nationalism. *Mapping the nation*, 12, 146-174.
- Bruter, M. (2005). *Citizens of Europe? The emergence of a mass European identity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carey, S. (2002). Undivided loyalties: Is national identity an obstacle to European integration? *European Union Politics*, 3, 387-413.
- Cinpoes, R. (2008). From national identity to European identity. *Journal of Identity and Migration Studies*, 2, 3-14.
- Cram, L. (2009) Identity and European integration: Diversity as a source of integration. *Nations and Nationalism*, 15, 109-128.
- Diez Medrano, J., & Gutierrez, P. (2001). Nested identities, national and European identity in Spain. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24, 753-778.
- Fitjar, R. D. (2010). Explaining variation in sub-state regional identities in Western Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 49, 522-544.
- George, S. (1998). *An awkward partner: Britain in the European Community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gifford, C. (2006). The rise of post-imperial populism: The case of right-wing Euroscepticism in Britain. *European Journal of Political Research*, 45, 851-869.
- Habermas, J. (1998). *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hayward, K. (2006). Reiterating national identities. *Cooperation and Conflict: Journal of the Nordic International Studies Association*, 41, 261-284.

- Jáuregui, G. B. (1986). National identity and political violence in the Basque Country. *European Journal of Political Research*, 14, 587-605.
- Keatin, M., & Wilson, A. (2014). Regions with regionalism? The rescaling of interest groups in six European states. *European Journal of Political Research*, 53, 840-857.
- Laitin, D. (2001). National identities in the European state. In M. Keating. & J. McGullin. (Eds.), *Minority nationalism and the changing international order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marác, L., & Versteegh, C.(2010). European citizenship as a new concept for European identity. *European and Regional Studies*, 1, 161-169.
- Marks, G. (1999). Territorial identities in the European union. In J. Anderson. (Eds.), *Regional integration and democracy: Expanding on the European experience*. Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Martínez-Herrera, E. (2002). From the nation0building to building identification with political communities: Consequences of political decentralization in Spain, the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia, 1978-2001. *European Journal of Political Research*, 41, 421-453.
- McCall, C. (1998). Postmodern Europe and the resources of communal identities in Northern Ireland. *European Journal of Political Research*, 33, 389-411.
- Muller, W., & Wright, V. (1994). Reshaping the state in Western Europe: The limits to retreat. *The state in Western Europe or Redefinition*, 17, 6-12.
- Muro, D., & Quiroga, A. (2005). Spanish nationalism. *Ethnicities*, 5, 9-29.
- Núñez, S. (2001). What is Spanish nationalism today? From legitimacy crisis to unfulfilled renovation (1975-200). *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24, 719-752.

Risse, T. (2003). The Euro between national and European identity. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 10, 487-505.

Smith, A. D. (1991). *National Identity*. London: Penguin.

Smith, A. D. (1992). National identity and the idea of European unity. *International Affairs*, 68, 55-76.

Winstanley, K. (2007). Constructing identities: Paramilitary disarmament and ceasefire in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country. *Canadian Political Science Association Conference*.