

EUROPEAN IDENTITY: A MYTH OR REALITY?

Ever since the creation of the European Union there have been attempts to construct the European identity. The notion of the European identity was backed up by the existing commonality of the countries member states of the European Union in terms of their history, culture, geographic proximity, political structure and the earnest belief that identity is never innate but is constructed starting from some elements that a group of individuals consider as shared.

There have been a lot of discussions concerning identity as such and collective identity in reference to Europe. What do we have to keep in mind: a collective identity, a variety of interlinking collective identities, an aggregation of personal identities, a broadly defined cultural category, or an official EU cultural or political identity? We have to admit that as a result of globalization societies are becoming more and more cosmopolitan, pluralized and interpenetrating and less self-contained culturally and territorially. In his article “The Challenges for European Identity” Francis Fukuyama [1] claims that the current crisis in the European Union is primarily a crisis over its identity rather than economic or political foundations. Alexander Svitych [2] believes that the construction of European identity is hardly possible and he continues with an example of the USSR, a multinational country with a clearly shaped Soviet identity based on the existence of a predominant nation in the Soviet Union – the Russian one—that served as a foundation for constructing the new Soviet people. In the EU there isn’t such a prevailing nation though there are claims to take the economic and political lead by some of the EU members. Besides, the USSR was built upon a Communist ideology that was dominant within its borders and even spread beyond them; there was created a new type of patriotism, mass enthusiasm and pride to be a Soviet citizen which helped the Soviet Union survive during WWII and other big historic crises. In contrast, the EU policy makers have never attempted to construct an identity with solidarity, equality and justice being the core values.

Europe at present time exists in the Postmodern epoch when globalization is fostering the creation of corporate rather than national states and there is therefore an inherent irresolvable contradiction in uniting nations when nation-states are fading away. In defense of the idea of the future for the European identity and the European Union we may bring forth some points which may serve as a foundation

for its unification and may foster it—they are common threats as a result of the vulnerability of the environment and a growing terror menace.

If we keep to the point that identity is not innate but constructed on some elements shared by a certain group of people, the conclusion is that the educational element is of paramount importance. Hence there are the steps made by the EU to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher education qualifications, the most notable of which is the Bologna Process. The countries-participants of the Bologna Process guarantee greater mobility for the students and university staff and opportunities to continue university courses in other EU countries, to carry out research in other than home EU universities thus partaking of another culture and its values and developing tolerance and acceptance of cultural diversities (recently Switzerland passed the law on limiting immigration into the county which will hamper the implementation of the Erasmus program and shut the door to foreigners seeking opportunities to work and study there!). There is criticism on the part of academics that the Bologna Process is aimed at meeting economic aspects. Dr. Chris Lorenz believes that the enlargement of scale of the European systems of higher education is in order to enhance its competitiveness by cutting down costs [3]. Besides, due to the differences between the philosophies and attitudes surrounding higher education in various countries, the prescribed length of the study can mean different things in different states or at different institutions within the same state.

A sense of European identity traditionally derives from the idea of a common European historical narrative that is assumed to be the source of the most fundamental European values – peoples' attitudes to family, job satisfaction, education, community, minorities, environment regulation and its global effects. The inventory of the European life values is not as clearly outlined yet as that of the American life values which is an obstacle on the way to shaping European identity.

The process of teaching and learning foreign languages in unified Europe is an important tool of developing cultural literacy. The term “cultural literacy” [4, c. 11] was introduced by Professor Eric Donald Hirsch in his book “Cultural Literacy. What Every American Needs to Know” [Vintage Books, 1988]. The terms “cultural literacy”, “shared knowledge” introduced by Dr. Hirsch were applied by him to teaching American students. Dr. Hirsch defined cultural literacy as “the network of information that all competent readers possess. It is the background information, stored in their minds , that enables them to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension , getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read” [4, c. 2]. The cultural context for Europe is hardly based on homogeneity

as European states differ in many aspects, such as languages, religion, family values, gender relationships, social taboos, economic development and ...the past! For the EU member states had lived very different lives before they became one financial and economic community. Besides every European country has its regional identity, including dialects; it has sub-culture identities (especially those of young people); it has ethnic and cultural minorities.

There has in some way always been a sense in which foreign language learning was seen as a preparation for travel to other countries. What has become more evident in recent decades is that language learning alone is insufficient: foreign language teaching should include the mediation of knowledge about the culture from which the language arises, and attitudes towards members of the culture [5]. In EU people need to master foreign languages for very different ends as they, in many cases, have to live, study, work and function in a foreign environment and their life quality largely depends on how well they know the language and culture of the country of their current stationing. Thus foreign languages should be taught in such a way so as to bring together two things: the possibility of making personal contact possible with those of another culture and the observational training that is necessary to decode and understand that contact as fully as possible, plus the need to understand the overall cultural context within which an individual operates, and the imagination that is necessary to transcend cultural boundaries in order to achieve this understanding [6, c. 25].

The construction of an identity is a matter of education, education goes through school. The harmonization of what is taught at school is thus an obvious step towards the construction of a European identity [7]

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