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Beyond Policies: a Crisis of Identity

There is no doubt: 2016 marks a symbolic turning point in the history of European integration. Just over first six months into the year, a new crisis, a crisis of identity, could be seen to emerge as a political consequence of the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom. This new crisis is, however, not really a new one. It existed at European level even before the recent developments started in the UK and it has been going on for as long as the debate on the integration process. It has now nevertheless gained a particular importance, because it has added a new dimension to the already existing questions on Europe's future.

Some say that Brexit will cause enormous damage to economic cooperation, to the functioning of the European Single Market. Others emphasise the political dimension of Britain's impending departure. They say Brexit will rupture the process of successful policy-making and enlargement in Europe, and bring an end to the ambitious goals of ever closer union, as defined in the Treaty. For them, this is a turning point – to be followed by decline and the challenge of disintegration.

For me, the result of the UK referendum is a striking example of an identity crisis at European level. All the components of this crisis have been with us for many years. The referendum has only brought to light and shown the political and economic implications of a missing or weakened identity. In this sense, the outcome of the referendum has not triggered a new crisis, but deepened an existing one and made the problem more visible. However, it has also contributed to a widening of two eminent policy crises which threaten solidarity and institutionalised cooperation between Member States and the European institutions: the Euro crisis and the migration crisis.

This is because all well-functioning cooperation on policies– based either on a Community or intergovernmental approach – needs a firm foundation of solidarity and mutual interest, underpinned by a sense of common identity. If this feeling does not exist, even in the loosest sense of the word, European integration will be doomed to fail. The question is therefore what conclusions should be drawn from the debates on European identity, policy crises and Brexit, respectively. Obviously, these lessons are important not only in themselves. They can also show us how to develop a concept of European identity that is acceptable to citizens and more successful.

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In this paper I will argue that, while the developments in British politics which led to Brexit happened simultaneously with the Euro and the migration crises, this is not just another policy crisis. It is more than that. It goes beyond policies, to the very heart of European integration: a European identity embodied by a willingness to cooperate closely with others. That is why the Brexit referendum is not just another referendum. Brexit indicates a political crisis – a crisis of identity – at policy level. This is the point where we can go beyond theoretical debates on European identity and develop a new European identity by using the policy instruments we have in our hands.

A new concept of European identity is, therefore, needed. We have to find a new concept which – unlike the traditional federalist vision – is not based on a top-down, but on a bottom-up approach. A European identity that does not exclude or supersede, but complements other loyalties and makes them richer. There are very successful policy instruments for this purpose at European level. We have to make the most of them in developing a new community of communities in Europe.

I A Turbulent Decade: Policy Crises at European Level

The history of European integration has never been short of policy crises. Right from the beginning, emergency situations and quick solutions – improvisations even – have always characterised the process. However, unexpected situations often served as moments of truth and gave a push to European integration.

Member States' funding difficulties in agriculture and rural development led to the creation of the Common Agricultural Policy, while, as a result of the coal crisis resulting from overproduction, a common regional policy was established in the early 1960s; just to mention two examples that illustrate the enormous – and eventually beneficial – effect various crises have had on policy and institutional development at European level.

Similarly, recession and stagnation in the past eight years have raised fundamental questions about the European economic model. They revealed the vulnerability of the Euro and made a case for a more disciplined and coordinated – even united, perhaps – budgetary policy in the Eurozone. Before the financial and economic crisis that erupted in 2008, some might have regarded the lack of a fiscal union as a convenient safeguard of Member States' power. However, as the crisis demonstrated, the incomplete institutional and policy setup of the single currency no longer simply point to a desire to preserve national sovereignty. It has been revealed to be a severe risk to the stability of one of the world's leading currencies.

Nevertheless, despite all the problems and the conflicting views on what solidarity actually means in practice, the feeling of belonging has never been seriously questioned. That is why the economic problems and challenges to the stability of the Euro have not led to a systemic crisis. Problems and debates on how to address these challenges remained at policy level and sought policy solutions. No matter how much the single European currency served as tangible proof of a European identity, its problems did not trigger an identity crisis.

Nevertheless, while the Euro crisis did not create a need for redefining the elements of identity on which European integration was based from the beginning, it was the worsening of the migration situation that led to this debate in the European Union. 'United in diversity', one of the fundamental principles and the slogan of the EU, has come under pressure. A sudden surge in the number of refugees and migrants coming to the EU posed a new challenge to Member States in 2015.

Undoubtedly, the issue was not new. Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain had accumulated an enormous amount of policy expertise to address the sometimes very difficult situations that can arise from uncontrolled migration. The novelty of the most recent case was twofold. First, the sheer number of migrants put unbearable pressure on the existing institutional and legal framework. Second, due to the opening of a new route for migration, the group of countries affected became larger. While the countries along the traditional routes across the Mediterranean were already relatively experienced in tackling the issue, Western Balkan and Central European states were shocked by large numbers of refugees and migrants arriving.

Not only did Dublin III collapse during the crisis, but also deepening disagreements between Member States led to a policy vacuum. Some see the solution in 'more Europe', seeking to establish a unified European migration policy with a fully-fledged institutional setup and decision-making powers at European level. For others, a renationalisation of European migration policy is the best way to address the challenge. They argue that efficient national migration policies are the safeguards of Europe's security and the only means to control a massive influx of people.

Moreover, the migration crisis led to bitter arguments between Member States over the way decisions are taken in the Council. The European Commission's proposals on relocation quotas and a unified European asylum system sparked controversies at national level. The use of qualified majority rules was challenged by Hungary and Slovakia in the Justice and Home Affairs Council. The two Member States turned to the European Court of Justice, arguing that the proper forum for making decisions on migration quotas would have been the European Council, and that there should have been a requirement to achieve a unanimous vote, rather than a qualified majority, because of the sensitivity of the issue.

These two recent examples of policy crises evolved almost perfectly simultaneously. They represent the institutional and policy challenges the Union is facing. Neither of them is unique in the history of European cooperation. The Euro crisis was preceded by the collapse of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism in the 1990s, and controlling mass migration has been on the agenda of ministers of Interior Ministers before, too. However, the depths of the problems in both cases caused more bitter controversies than in the past.

During these two crises, conflicts have emerged that have a new dimension compared to traditional policy debates. It is no longer only about discussing competing ideas and proposals for addressing policy challenges. Now, one of the fundamental principles of European cooperation is being questioned. Challenging the principle of solidarity among the Member States forming the Union is a new development in both crises. This new dimension takes us beyond conventional policy frameworks and leads to the fundamental issue of European identity.

While solidarity has been one of the catchwords during the crises, it cannot be interpreted only in a policy context. Solidarity is strongly linked to community. There is no community without identity. As a result, the debate of policy proposals formulated in the name of solidarity has opened up a new discussion of European identity. The question of values and principles made its way back onto the agenda, and politicians again faced the once buried challenges of identity and community at European level. Diverging interpretations and definitions of what solidarity means and what its limits are did not only reveal a lack of consensus. They also, for the first time in the history of European integration, raised the possibility of excluding a Member State – Greece – from the Euro zone.

All taboos regarding integration were subsequently broken. If the exclusion of a country can be openly debated then a voluntary departure is also possible. If the ideas underpinning European integration are to be reformulated then the institutional setup based on these ideas can be redefined as well. In this context, the longstanding political conflict in the United Kingdom relating to the country's European Union membership became a debate on identity, too.

II Brexit: from Policy to Identity

The potential departure of a Member State from the European Union has been on the agenda before. The history of post-war European cooperation had seen serious intentions to leave even before the UK referendum. A French threat of withdrawal from the Treaty was intended to strengthen the country's position during the 'empty chair' period in 1965-66, which marked the first constitutional crisis in the European Community. The British referendum on membership of 1975 and all the following referenda on ratifications of new Treaties brought up constitutional issues and future institutional scenarios of the European Union.

Not one of them, however, explicitly raised the question of identity. Institutional settings or the distribution of powers were extensively debated, but feelings of solidarity and the sense of community remained untouched. The main principle underpinning European integration was never questioned in any Member State, the sense of belonging never undermined during the respective campaigns.

This is what makes this year's referendum in the United Kingdom fundamentally different. The starting point was a policy debate on how to control the influx of Central and Eastern European employees that have been coming to the UK for years. Of course citizens of these countries – the so-called new Member States – were only exercising their right to free movement within the EU to find work available in labour markets recently opened to them.

Germany and some other Member States had been more reluctant to open their markets to employees and entrepreneurs from Central and East European countries. Other Member States, like the United Kingdom, took their Treaty obligations seriously: they offered the citizens of these countries opportunities to take up jobs and start businesses right after their accession in 2004.

As a result, a new workforce appeared on the British labour market – hundreds of thousands of inexpensive but highly qualified employees. They sometimes filled vacancies and

posts for which they were overqualified. Nevertheless, fears and political tensions arose, boosted by some tabloids and politicians.

The British government at first tried to respond using employment and migration policy. Initial policy measures included attempts at restricting access to jobs and social benefits available to every European Union citizen.

Drafting these policy measures, the government faced a double challenge. Externally, any restriction of the free movement of workers contradicts one of the fundamental – and universally respected – principles of the European Single Market. That is why the government was confronted with strong and legitimate resistance at European level. Domestically, however, these policy responses proved insufficient to quell the debate. As the country approached the 2015 parliamentary elections, Eurosceptic politicians – both in opposition and in the government – turned what had originally been policy issues into a highly political one.

According to them, the 'invasion' of the British labour market by Eastern Europeans was a result of the fact that the country had lost control over immigration. They argued that it was time to reassert its right to determine how many people could come to Britain, and from which countries. They raised the debate about immigration to a higher level and linked the issue at its core to another, more traditional dilemma of British politics, its geopolitical affiliation with the European Union. The EU, as many in the UK see it, is a superstate where Member States are reduced to submission by Brussels, losing their sovereignty and independence. The solution, argued the Eurosceptics, lies either in returning to a loose form of economic integration or the UK leaving the European Union as a political project.

Faced with such a potentially explosive political issue in the run-up to the 2015 campaign, the government – and the Europhiles in the Conservative Party – tried to avoid making it an electoral issue. It was clear to them that if the elections turned into a vote on EU membership, the issue would split and paralyse the Conservative Party, leading to defeat.

That is why David Cameron decided that he needed to eliminate the problem from the campaign. He chose to try to gain time and postpone confrontation – thereby raising the stakes. By declaring that a separate referendum would be held after the parliamentary elections he neutralised the migration problem during the campaign. But at the same time he turned it into a high-profile political issue for the very near future. The British Prime Minister put what had originally been a mostly policy-based domestic political debate into a European context.

For him, pushing for new rules on migration was just part of a wider plan to reform the European Union. Cameron and his supporters in the Conservative Party tried to win the battle over Europe by emphasising the need for a fundamental reform, superseding policy-based objections of his opponents.

The manoeuvre succeeded only partially. Cameron did manage to exclude migration and the issue of Britain's place in the EU from the campaign and secured a convincing victory for the Conservatives. But afterwards, the postponed debate became a battle of conflicting views not only on migration, but on relations to and in the European Union as such.

Thus, Pandora's Box had been opened and one year after the parliamentary elections the United Kingdom found itself in a campaign again. This time, however, it was not a parliamentary majority at stake, but British membership of the EU. Migration and other EU-related policy

issues were overwhelmed by high politics. Both sides of the campaign benefited from the new situation.

Pro-EU groups – the 'remain camp' – supported a new deal for Britain in the EU. Led by the Prime Minister, they drew up a list of proposals. Policy measures, including restriction of social benefits for EU citizens, were drafted, and David Cameron visited European capitals to drum up support from other Member States. Eventually, at the European Council meeting in February 2016, the British Prime Minister secured the critical backing of both the other Member States and the European Commission.

As such, the Remain campaign seemed to have secured an important victory. Cameron's aim was to present himself as a competent, highly respected European statesman who could successfully represent and protect British national interests. His proposals went on to form the core of the Remain camp's arguments in the run-up to the referendum. Based on exact calculations and tangible proposals, supporters of EU membership campaigned at policy level. They put policy-messages at the heart of the campaign. The United Kingdom is better off inside the EU than outside of it – this was their main message. Economic and financial arguments designed to appeal to voters' heads seemed to be invincible.

Had it still been a policy debate, the Remain camp would surely have won. However, something happened which the Prime Minister and his supporters failed to notice: while they were preparing for a policy debate using rational arguments, the real battle took place at a different level.

Delaying the debate had given the leave-camp the opportunity to turn the issue into a genuine political one, into a question of membership and identity. Exploiting the potential of this controversial question, they put independence and British identity at the heart of their campaign. Independence and integration, membership and national identity were presented as antagonistic terms. Instead of mirroring the Remain camp's route of investing energy in drawing up policy alternatives, they chose a different path and launched a campaign centred on identity. They put the emphasis on emotional factors and mobilised voters by appealing to feelings of national identity and a sense of belonging. For them, the European Union was a supranational project hostile to nation states and national identity. That is why, in their logic, it had to be rejected by citizens.

The Leave camp changed the narrative of the referendum campaign. The possibility of the United Kingdom's departure became increasingly real. This unexpected development unsettled supporters of the Remain camp. European integration is unpopular when it comes to identity issues. The demand of taking back control, on the other hand, was at the same time popular and motivating for many voters – just because it could be closely linked to national identity.

That is where the Remain camp lost the battle. While they were pursuing a policy-oriented campaign, focusing on common sense, the Leave campaigners stirred voters' emotions. They set their national identity against a European identity and claimed that the two were antagonistic, incompatible. They were able to do this because at least one influential interpretation of European identity underpins this narrative. And they succeeded because this sort of artificial European identity has always been unpopular with European citizens.

The Remain camp lost the referendum because the battle was not fought where they expected it to be fought. They were prepared for a policy campaign – and faced with an identity issue. What happened to them happens invariably when national identities are set against European identity: the latter loses.

The significance and the consequences of the referendum teach us important lessons on European identity. The referendum painfully demonstrates the damage to European cooperation caused by the absence of a viable and loveable concept of a European identity. The new definition of European identity is not rocket science. It is right under our nose. It has been evolving for decades, fed by policy measures and based on common sense. We just have to make it more visible. Then it can be the foundation of a new narrative on European identity.

III Identity or Identities?

Does an individual have an identity or identities? The question has always been a subject of debate. The easy answer, of course, can be misleading. On the one hand we can talk about a person's identity, in the singular, as a coherent set of feelings and parts of a personality. On the other hand every individual is made up of multiple identities; these make up his or her identity. Often the outcome of these debates depends on where people put the emphasis.

National identity is traditionally perceived as a homogeneous structure that supersedes every other loyalty. The era of nationalism – the 19th and 20th centuries – led to the creation of political structures, above all nation-states, based on a strong and exclusive sense of nationhood. There was no place in this concept for other loyalties unless they had been subordinated to the national identity.

Hence, following the patterns of European traditions, there has been a tendency to envisage that a European identity would develop in the same way as national identities. From the beginning, supporters of European integration were keen on building a new, supranational, structurally homogenous European identity, which absorbs national identities into a larger unit of loyalty.

This exclusive approach was doomed to failure. While a few ardent Eurofederalists saw it as an indispensable prerequisite for successful European integration, the majority of European citizens have always been averse to supranationalism. All the more so since major building blocks of a viable identity have been missing.

The process of European integration as an intrinsically technocratic one has always lacked emotional attachment. This did not cause problems until the push for stronger political integration in the 1990s, when the new ambitions of the European Union immediately raised questions about the foundations of the yet-to-be-born political project. These questions revolved around primordial components of a political community, such as legitimacy, demos and identity.

That is how the fate of European cooperation and the success of European identity became inextricably linked. At the stage of integration we have reached now, the prospects of the European project are determined by the level of public support for European solutions. All

previous and recent examples show that the European Union loses when confronted directly with national loyalties. These cases also demonstrate that the European identity, even in its embryonic form, falls away when citizens face this kind of binary choice.

The Brexit referendum is the most striking recent illustration of what happens when national and European identities are set against each other. The Leave camp very consciously portrayed traditional supranational notions of European identity as being antagonistic to other loyalties. The European super-state's mission – they said – was to undermine organic communities and loyalties and to subjugate nation-states to an illegitimate bureaucracy based in Brussels. This bureaucracy was bent on eliminating all identities other than a supranational European one and eventually taking all means of control away from organic communities.

That was the line of argument during the campaign which left the Remain camp defenceless. They were well-prepared for policy debates, had a myriad of facts on their side on issues of economy and finance, but lost the battle on identity questions. They simply could not generate emotional support for their campaign. Enthusiasm won it for the leave-camp.

At this point we confront a question that is posed and reinforced by referenda in the European Union time and time again. To be viable, an institutional arrangement needs a certain level of emotional attachment. Without this attachment, institutions collapse. Referenda show that clashes of identities are lethal for European integration because citizens prefer arguments based on national identity to those based on a European one.

Does this mean that the project of building a European identity is doomed to fail? If the answer is yes then European cooperation will return to national solutions, at least in politics. This would not necessarily result in the failure of the European project as a whole. It would just indicate that we are about to enter a new intergovernmental period. Looser forms of cooperation, as well as a stronger emphasis on the national level, can be feasible as well, but it must be clear that policy cooperation and competitiveness would suffer as a result.

Previous examples demonstrate that supranationalism leads nowhere. Failed attempts to create a supranational European identity were punished by the UK referendum. However, the failure of supranationalism does not mean that all other forms of a European solution must be excluded.

IV What does the Brexit-Referendum Teach Us on Identity?

One could argue that, had the referendum campaign remained focused on policy issues, supporters of British membership of the EU would have prevailed. They were better prepared, more concrete in their rhetoric, and common sense was on their side. The result nevertheless demonstrated a major deficiency of European integration. Policy results may be convincing, and rational voters may accept them. However, when it comes to politics, policy results fail to touch the feelings needed to get voters to support the project.

Polls and analyses suggest this happened with the Brexit referendum. There is a strong correlation between citizens' age and social status and their inclination to support the European project. Young, urban, educated people are generally in favour of Britain being a member of

the European Union. Less educated, aging, rural populations have been the stronghold of the Leave campaign. This means that young, educated people are more willing to include the European dimension in their self-definition; that is to embrace European identity.

Having arrived at this point, a definition of European identity is inevitable. Undoubtedly, there are broad variations of the term. One can define it as a geographical identity; for others it is linked to European culture. Without questioning the relevance of these approaches, in this paper a narrower interpretation is used. In this context, European identity is a sort of political identity, linked to the project of European integration. As Leo Tindemans puts it in his report in 1975: 'The fact that our countries have a common destiny is not enough. This fact must also be seen.' For me, the belief in this common destiny is the cornerstone of a European identity. It does not exclude or contradict any other loyalty. Moreover, it is built upon multiple, overlapping local, regional, ethnic, national or religious identities.

Only with this interpretation of European identity can we avoid the trap of supranationalism. The European Union's only chance of survival is not to be a superstate but a community of communities. Similarly, the only viable option for having a European identity is the one based on the complementarity of various overlapping identities. Recent political developments suggest that a European identity can only be successful if it is not set against national or other loyalties. And as national identities show, overlapping identities can live together harmoniously in a personality. One can be proud of their hometown or region as much as of their motherland. To recreate this complementarity is the secret to success for a European identity.

Strikingly, there is a prototype of this model that functions very well at European level. Next year, in 2017, the Erasmus programme will celebrate its 30th anniversary. Erasmus is the most successful – and certainly the most popular – project of European integration: more than two million young European students have been given the opportunity to study in another country, while staff, apprentices, volunteers, youth workers and other young people have also been offered the chance to go abroad. They have experienced Europe and developed a sort of European identity. For them, attachment to European cooperation is not a subject for ideological debates, but an everyday feeling.

Since its beginning, the Erasmus programme has shaped generations of young Europeans. They can be found everywhere in economic, cultural and also political elites, both at national and European level. Their support for the European project has been best demonstrated exactly by the results of the British referendum. Analyses show that while the majority of the politically active population voted to leave, of the about 64% of registered voters between 18 and 24 years old who are estimated to have gone to the polls, 73 percent are thought to have supported British EU membership.

That means that the complementary model of building a European identity works. It can be developed and reinforced by policy measures just like Erasmus. Based on policies, the identity-building process can avoid the traps of the past and ideological debates. By bringing up new generations of committed Europeans, the major public benefit is to make the European Union stronger.