

European Identity As a Cornerstone of Regionalism

Perceptions on the Future of Europe

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Introduction

THE RECENT crises that the European Union has experienced reconfirmed, more than ever, the need of the EU to readjust its strategic development in the light of the difficulties it had to navigate through. The financial crisis, followed by the refugee crisis, Brexit and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic represented critical moments that prompted the European Commission to address a variety of issues concerning strengthening the resilience of the EU. Even before the aforementioned crises, scholars argued that the European project needs to be revitalized,¹ with claims that its institutional architecture is outmoded.²

One of the main concerns related to all these crises is the asymmetrical consequences felt not only at the level of Member States, but also at the level of citizens. The sometimes unfavorable perception over the European Union's capacity to address the effects of these crises allowed both old and new political forces to increase their Eurosceptic appeal. In fact, scholars point to the fact that in many cases Euroscepticism worked in tandem with populism.³ Ever since, quite a number of political figures made a career out of bashing the EU and everything the European project stands for. Politics in almost all Member States developed at least one notorious populist party that scapegoated European institutions and their representatives, generally referred to as "elites." Parties such as Front National in France, Partij Voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands, Perussuomalaiset in Finland, Swedish Democrats in Sweden, and UKIP in the United Kingdom have become only some of the most prominent party names that advocated for a weaker European Union; others followed, both in Western and Eastern Europe.

Populism is a political super-strategy that makes use of a variety of communication practices in its attempt to frame politics as a fight between the pure People and the corrupt elite.⁴ As such, by accompanying Euroscepticism, populism depicts the European Union as a political project that sides with its leaders against ordinary people, nationals of Member States. Timo Soini, the former leader of the True Finns, described elites as "arrogant bureaucrats," "cold-hearted technocrats," "uncomprehending centralizers" and

“big-money worshippers.”⁵ Such considerations are typical for the—if not explicit, at least implicit—image that populist Euroscepticism is trying to build for the European Union. In 2013, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders announced they were joining forces as they were preparing for the 2014 elections for the European Parliament; their plan was to slay what they called “the monster in Brussels”—another analogy used by Eurosceptic populists for the European project.⁶

The 2014 elections for the European Parliament marked significant gains for political actors that championed anti-EU narratives. In France, the Front National ended up first with 25 percent of the votes, as did Dansk Folkeparti in Denmark. Beppe Grillo’s Movimento 5 Stelle finished second in Italy, while in the Netherlands Geert Wilder’s Partij Voor de Vrijheid third. The 2019 elections for the European Parliament slowed down the success of such parties, but Eurosceptic populism has definitely remained in the game. There are at least two possible explanations for the success of such a rhetoric. On the one hand, EU elections are generally “second-order” elections, meaning that voters perceive them to be less important, but still consider them to represent a chance to admonish those who hold power, thus an excellent occasion to manifest support for the anti-establishment parties or underdogs.⁷ On the other hand, one can argue that the European Union suffers from a so-called “diploma democracy” syndrome. Building on the findings of Bovens and Wille, who argue that in the Netherlands the higher educated have come to dominate politics,⁸ the rather complicated system of European politics seems to be comprehended primarily by those who are specialized in the field, rather than by ordinary citizens. Much more famous is the concept that many scholars call the “communication deficit” of the EU, which is the result of the fact that European governance operates on a decision-making model that is quite complex.⁹

The success of Eurosceptic populism rests on the difficulties that European integration has experienced, which in turn exerted considerable strain on the idea of a European identity. The European Union works on the supposition that economic integration leads to political integration and then to a European identity. However, political forces who adopt Eurosceptic populist narratives use national identities as counterweights for a European identity, directing popular dissatisfaction with various policies or in times of economic hardships against the European Union,¹⁰ even when the EU has limited or no power in relation to the areas that generated those difficulties. Narratives against European identity have proven to be especially popular in times of crisis, as they are very powerful tools of political communication that allow transmitters to portray themselves—whether as active agents or passive experiencers—in opposition to others. Narratives explain why (political) events have developed the way they did, finding both causal and moral explanations.¹¹ Political narratives construct the basis for a sense of collective identity, therefore representing the means through which identities are created, conserved or changed over time. Narrative and identity are fundamental for the maintenance and reproduction of political conflict.¹² Even more so, an emergency or a crisis—as is the current pandemic—develops a “blaming system”¹³ in which political actors and citizens alike engage in a scapegoating quest that allows Eurosceptic populism to flourish, exploiting the declining trust in democratic institutions and mobilizing discontent with politics altogether by fueling sentiments of distrust, cynicism and alienation.¹⁴

European Identity and its Relevance for Regionalism

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION was projected in accordance with the following path: economic integration would be succeeded by political integration. The theory of regional integration is associated with Ernst Haas, who argued that cooperation between states would reach unintended consequences given the so-called “spillover” effect. Haas argued that cooperation between countries would eventually involve a growing number of people and would naturally demand more intense bureaucratic contact and consultation, thus leading to cooperation on a greater number of issues.¹⁵ This, in turn, would encourage supranational decision-making. As such, it was expected that stakeholders would orient their behavior in such a manner as to foster EU integration.¹⁶ Even more, Haas expected that European integration would be so powerful as to produce a “new nationalism,” i.e., an ideological expression of a melting pot of values and beliefs of nationals belonging to all Member States. This ideology would construct the idea of a European identity that goes beyond national citizenship.

Identity remains a contested term, with scholars from various fields proposing different definitions and perspectives in their attempt to capture its meaning. However, from a sociological perspective, any collective identity entails the existence of a group of individuals that accept the fact that they share values, interests and experiences, which make them feel solidarity towards each other.¹⁷ European identity is—like national or regional identity—the expression of an imagined political community, and the relevance of political identities rests especially on their mobilizing potential.¹⁸ What is more, political identities have a strong narrative dimension, which allows them to create stories about the existence, traits and actions of the specific group of individuals that form the collective identity. Scientific literature also underlines that identities exhibit fluid boundaries, thus exposing them to contestation or at least negotiation.¹⁹

The notion of European identity is of crucial importance for the regional model that Europe strives for and that the European Union represents in economic and political terms. A validation of the importance that European identity holds in relation to how the EU understands to present itself to the rest of the world was the European Summit held in Copenhagen in 1973. On this occasion, the European Community sought to introduce the concept of “European identity” into their common foreign relations. According to the Declaration signed in the capital of Denmark by the Heads of State and Government of the (then) nine Member States, their act would “enable them to achieve a better definition of their relations with other countries and of their responsibilities and the place which they occupy in world affairs.”²⁰ According to the document, European identity is possible given the common heritage, interests and special obligations of the signatories. The shared attitudes towards life and perspectives on representative democracy, the rule of law, social justice and respect for human rights are stated as fundamental elements of the European identity. Thus, European identity became not only a symbol of European integration but, more than that, a manifestation of unity when Member States acted on the international arena. It is in this sense that the Declaration argues that European identity has a pivotal role in placing the European Community (now the Eu-

ropean Union) as a relevant actor on the international scene. The document states that international problems have become too difficult for any Member State to solve alone, thus Europe is urged to unite its efforts in creating one strong voice “if it wants to make itself heard and play its proper role in the world.”²¹

The Declaration on European Identity was one of the first institutional efforts towards creating an official infrastructure that would allow citizens to identify themselves with the supranational organization that the European project was building.²² Given the important role that political identity plays within regionalism, the aforementioned document is considered to have been very relevant for shaping European regionalism.²³ However, when referring to political identity, one cannot overlook the behavioral dimension of the concept. Movements that advocate for a strong European identity do not encompass solely political elites, but many people, ordinary citizens who feel they want to have a say in how the European Union should develop and what role it should play on the international arena.

In light of the threat posed by Eurosceptic populism, but also the need for popular legitimacy for the direction in which the European project would steer, in 2017 the European Commission launched the so-called White Paper on the Future of Europe. Its purpose was to organize a public debate on how the European Union should evolve in a context of growing internal and international difficulties. The document speaks about the profile of the EU, mentioning that its efforts make the world a safer and more sustainable place, arguing that “Europe’s role as a positive global force is more important than ever.”²⁴ In its introduction, the document describes the challenges that the European Union is facing, amongst which a changing global order. Throughout the second part of the document, the readers are acquainted with five scenarios, each of them representing an image of what the EU could look like in the near future, and are then asked to communicate how they see the development of the European project. The document refuses to paint reality in black and white and it therefore offers a range of scenarios that are not exhaustive.²⁵

Scenarios for the Future of Europe

DESPITE REFERRING to a medium-term vision for the European Union, there is a sense of urgency that the *White Paper on the Future of Europe* (2017) is built on. The document mentions that time has come to fight the rhetoric of blaming ‘Brussels’ for a variety of problems while taking credit at a national level for the success of the European Union. It also emphasizes that support for the EU is no longer unconditional and that trust in the EU has decreased quite alarmingly. The paper therefore argues that there needs to be a debate on the alternatives that the European project can take into account in terms of its development; such alternatives range from keeping the status quo or changing the scope and priorities, to a partial or collective leap forward. The five scenarios are presented below.

Scenario 1: Carrying on

The first scenario taken into account proposes that the European Union continues its development without major fluctuations from its existing course. The European project looks into how differences between Member States can be settled in order to deliver on its priorities. This scenario also mentions foreign policy, proposing that Member States consolidate their voice as a single international actor. As such, the European Union can continue to actively pursue trade agreements with partners from around the world and to contribute towards shaping the global agenda in areas such as climate, financial stability and sustainable development. However, the White Paper signals that, especially given the Brexit experience, this scenario will most probably test the unity of Member States especially in times of major disruptions.²⁶

Scenario 2: Nothing but the single market

The second scenario proposes that the European Union abandons efforts to find common ground in new policy areas, but instead focuses on deepening key aspects related to the single market. In other words, this scenario proposes that the single market becomes the main rationale for the very existence of the European Union. Lifting the burden in other areas means that the focus shifts almost exclusively towards the free movement of capital and of goods. However, such an approach would increase or at least conserve differences in areas related to social and financial aspects and would not be able to fully guarantee the free movement of workers and services. This second scenario would entail a loosened cooperation on security and migration matters, as well as bilateral settling of issues, on a case-by-case basis. The paper suggests that this scenario would be efficient in delivering better policy communication, but the major cost would be that of limiting collective action of Member States, thus making the European Union less able to rise to the expectations of citizens.²⁷

Scenario 3: Those who want more do more

This specific scenario was associated with a concept that has been addressed years before by scholars and professionals alike in the field of European studies, namely “a multi-speed Europe.” Such a connection is the result of the fact that this third scenario advanced by the *White Paper on the Future of Europe* imagines the emergence of so-called “coalitions of the willing,” that stem from the willingness (or lack thereof) of Member States to work together in specific policy areas. Some examples that the paper mentions are defense, internal security, taxation or social matters. Practically, in this case, some of the 27 Member States would be able to deepen their cooperation in certain domains, while others may choose not to, at least for a period of time. However, relations with third countries remain managed at EU level on behalf of all Member States.²⁸ Romanian officials, as well as representatives of other Eastern European countries have repudiated this scenario; the Prime Minister of Bulgaria at that time famously declared that his country “does not want to be in the EU’s backyard,” echoing concerns formulated by Romania, Poland and Croatia. However, specialists argue that the European Union is already (or even that it has been from the very beginning) a multi-speed project, given

the different and historically-rooted dynamics of Member States, as well as their distinct capacities to adapt to challenges.²⁹

Scenario 4: Doing less more efficiently

In this scenario, Member States reach the conclusion that focusing on too many priorities is draining the European Union of its resources (in the broadest sense of the word) and harms its overall image. Therefore, they decide to focus attention on a reduced number of areas so as to act swifter and more efficiently. In this sense and in these specific areas collective decisions are implemented and enforced directly, while in other areas the European Union stops acting. The document mentions that the EU chooses these priorities so as to allow the outcomes to meet expectations. Implementing this scenario would allow for a better communication of the responsibilities of the European Union versus those of national Governments, and it would strengthen areas in which the EU decides to be more active. However, we are announced that the main challenge would be that of deciding which these priorities would be chosen.³⁰

Scenario 5: Doing much more together

The last scenario included in the *White Paper on the Future of Europe* describes a European Union in which power and resources are shared by Member States to an ever greater extent. Cooperation between all Member States meets new levels, as it goes beyond what has ever existed in the European Union. As such, the EU moves further with great celerity, enforcing decisions faster. The fifth scenario makes the most extensive reference to regionalism, as it describes what “doing much more together” would mean for the European project in terms of its international power, e.g., its voice would be stronger given the fact that the EU would be represented by one seat only in most international fora, a European Defence Union would be created, the EU would lead international efforts in various domains such as migration or fight against climate change. However, the paper mentions that this scenario, if implemented, could alienate parts of society “which feel that the EU lacks legitimacy or has taken too much power away from national authorities.”³¹ As such, we are alerted that the possible cost associated with this scenario is the rise of Eurosceptic populist political forces, which would exploit the concerns of citizens in front of an ever-growing power of the EU.

Methodology

ALL OF the five scenarios presented above constitute, in fact, a question of European identity—one which has profound implications on Europe as an actor on the international scene. Citizens have been asked to have their say on which of these five scenarios fits best their expectations on the European Union in the future. As such, by tapping into the answers provided by users of an online interactive platform (N=475), the current paper seeks to determine the degrees to which respondents identified themselves with the five scenarios launched by the European Commission within the *White Paper on the Future of Europe*.

The online platform entitled “Communicating EU” was available and freely accessible between December 2017 and February 2018, and was advertised in online newspapers, as well as via social media. Users were asked to position themselves in relation to a set of 25 statements related to how they believe the European Union should function. Each of these statements corresponded to one of the five scenarios developed in the *White Paper on the Future of Europe*. The document issued by the European Commission was coded, and for each scenario the platform included five statements, in a style accessible for the general public. “Communicating EU” worked in the logic of a Vote Advice Application,³² meaning that it embedded an online survey that offered an ‘instant reward’ under the form of a personalized answer related to the degree the users identified themselves with the five scenarios. Based on the answers provided by users on a five-point scale from “Totally agree” to “Totally disagree,” the platform revealed the percentage of identification with each of the scenarios. The data gathered was then analyzed by looking at its distribution and correlation, so as to understand which of the scenarios users mostly identified themselves with and to look into the similarities between the data.

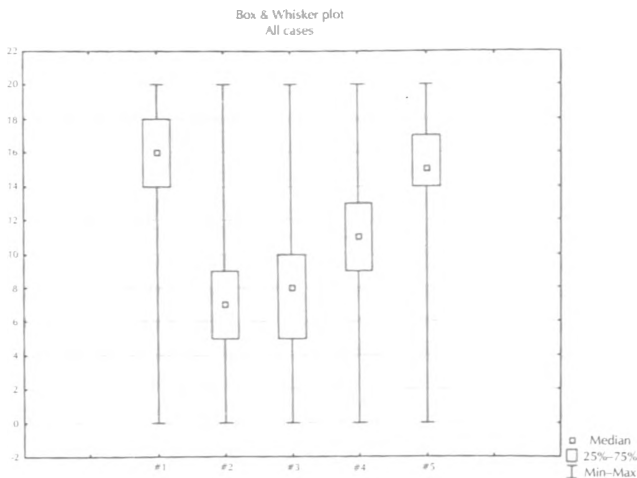
Results and Discussion

THE RESULTS outline that most of the positions of the respondents in relation to the statements coincided with two of the five scenarios, i.e., *Scenario 1: Carrying on* and *Scenario 5: Doing much more together*. The Box & Whisker plot presented below shows the mean distance within each group and the dispersion around the means. Quite surprisingly, although *Scenario 3: Those who want more do more* (the infamous scenario of a “multi-speed Europe”) was the most repudiated publicly during the political

debate surrounding the *White Paper on the Future of Europe*, results indicate that the scenario respondents least identified themselves with was the second one, i.e. *Nothing but the single market*.

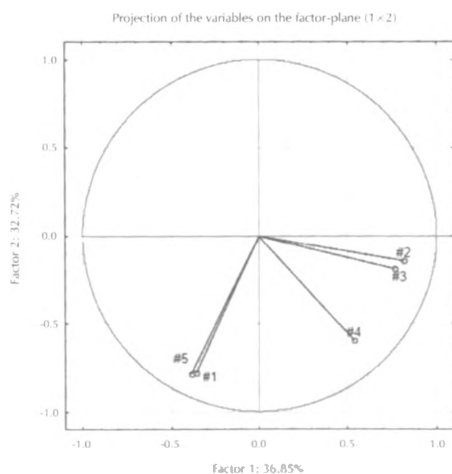
The analysis was taken further in order to show not only the differences in terms of identification with each of the five scenarios, but also the degree of correlation between the data depending on the answers provided by users. The Principal Component Analysis (PCA) is a dimension-

FIG. 1. BOX & WHISKER PLOT PRESENTING THE MEAN DISTANCE FOR EACH SCENARIO AND THE DISPERSION AROUND THE MEANS



reducing technique that seeks to find a common direction of the data.³³ The results indicate that *Scenario 1: Carrying on* and *Scenario 5: Doing much more together* have the greatest data similarity.

FIG. 2. RESULTS OF THE PRINCIPAL COMPONENT ANALYSIS



The results presented above show that there is a clear propensity towards the first and last scenario launched by the European Commission in its *White Paper on the Future of Europe*. As such, respondents seemed to be torn between keeping the European Union as it is and deepening integration. However, the two scenarios are not a world apart and the image might be an expression of the strong pro-European stances that have characterized Romanian citizens ever since the country became a Member State. A variety of sociological studies indicate that Romanians have remained some of the most enthusiastic citizens of the European Union, manifesting trust in European institutions and a favorable

attitude towards the EU in general. Even before its accession to the EU, Romania was amongst the most pro-European countries.³⁴ There are many explanations for these perceptions, some of which have to do with considering EU institutions to represent a welcoming counterweight to the weak performance of national institutions.³⁵ In regards to European regionalism, the results of the study are rather straightforward: respondents favored a strong EU on the international scene, which offers leadership, but also protection.

Conclusions

THE CURRENT paper sought to contribute to at least two previously understudied topics: firstly, to add to the debate on the issue of European identity using a large-N survey that generated data on perceptions of Romanians related to the development of the European Union as presented by the *White Paper on the Future of Europe* issued by the European Commission in March 2017. Secondly, it offers supplementary arguments for correlating the debate on European identity with regionalism. The sense of belonging to a larger group, the very idea of a political identity has genuine implications for how strong one believes the political structure that supports this identity should be.

There is another relevant aspect that needs to be considered in relation to studies that present perceptions on the European Union, i.e., the degree to which the general

public comprehends or keeps itself informed about the transformations that the EU is experiencing. Indifference or lack of knowledge can significantly affect the results of such studies.³⁶ As much as possible, the current study lifted the language barrier when collecting perceptions of respondents, and it could do so given the accessible style in which the *White Paper on the Future of Europe* was drawn up. However, future directions of study should seriously consider further breaking down concepts or expressions that might be too complicated to understand and thus impede scholars in obtaining an accurate image of public perceptions on European issues.

The current paper adds to the centrality of identity in studies of international relations. European identity is what gives meaning and legitimacy to the political project that the European Union represents. The question is to what purpose this identity is constructed³⁷ and how it can be used to advance the ambitions of the European Union on the international stage. □

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Abstract

European Identity As a Cornerstone of Regionalism: Perceptions on the Future of Europe

A common political identity is of crucial importance for the success of the regional model that the European Union strives for. European identity is a symbol not only of integration but also of unity when Member States act in the international arena. A significant part of its legitimacy lies in the popular support for different options that the European Union has in terms of strategic development. On 1 March 2017, the European Commission launched the White Paper on the Future of Europe. The document proposed five non-exhaustive scenarios for the strategic development of the European Union, following Brexit and the other crises that the Union had to navigate through. The document called for European citizens to have their say on how they see the future of the common European project. Looking into data gathered by an online interactive platform, the current paper taps into the preferences of respondents from Romania in terms of the scenarios for the future of Europe. The paper seeks to bring a contribution to the study of regionalism by looking into how political identities play a role in shaping the concept.

Keywords

regionalism, European identity, online platform, future of Europe, Euroscepticism, populism