

European Identity and the Test of COVID-19

by Irene Caratelli

What does it mean to be European? Identity is not a natural element, biologically determined and fixed in time, but the result of social processes and structural dynamics that together create a social construct. The COVID-19 pandemic has re-ignited debates about European identity and solidarity, forcing EU institutions and member states to navigate the old dichotomy of *national-versus-European* identity and interests – as if these concepts were necessarily in contradiction with one another.

European governments and citizens cannot allow the COVID-19 emergency to (re)determine our identity and interests, erecting national barriers or trade wars. The crisis can bring us together or tear us apart, but the ultimate responsibility will rest on people, the leaders and citizens of Europe, who can determine how we will emerge from this pandemic and redefine what it means to be “European”.

Identities and interests can be defined as exclusive (e.g. Belgian or Swedish) or overlapping (e.g. half German, half Polish and European). “A majority of the population feel that they are citizens of the EU in all EU countries. This opinion is held by close to three-quarters of respondents at EU level (73%, +2 percentage points since autumn 2018), whereas just over a quarter of Europeans do not share this opinion (26%, -2).”¹

Imagine taking a poll on the identity of Europeans across time. For most of their history, people in Europe had local identities. The concept of a state was formalized only in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia. Yet, people did not feel a strong attachment to their “state” as they were subjects and often changed King (Queen/Emperor) as a

¹ European Commission, “Public Opinion in the European Union”, in *Standard Eurobarometer 91 (Spring 2019)*, p. 16, <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/88420>.

Irene Caratelli is Director of the International Relations and Global Politics Programme, The American University of Rome.

result of wars (bloody and frequent) and royal marriages. People who once were subjects then became citizens. The right to hold those in power accountable is a recent concept in human history and the degree to which people do so is related to their identity as citizens rather than subjects.

National movements helped to cement states, acting as the glue that created bottom-up shared identities, against previous top-down structures. In this light, nationalism can be considered a force that helped the emancipation of people in their journey from subjects to citizens and in their fight against foreign oppression. But nationalism can be used both to unite and divide. To be sure, the nation-building process is based on the belief that people have more in common with someone of their own nationality (even if they have never met), rather than their next-door neighbour who lives across the river but is, technically speaking, a citizen of another (nation) state.²

While Europeans were fighting to be citizens, they kept other people in slavery and exploited their territories. This system lasted until empires crumbled and slavery was finally abolished. Then segregation came into place, and although ethnic segregation has been legally abolished almost everywhere, discrimination is still widely exercised. Women went from baby-making machines to individuals with legal rights. New battles erupt

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London/New York, Verso, 1983. See also Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994.

because social and political identities (and interests) are not *natural* and static. Power structures can be questioned and/or dismantled according to changing values. Personal, social and political battles transformed the identity of people who did not conform to what was supposed to be normal (slavery), given (absolutism) or natural (inequality).

Since the invention of nation-states did not diminish the conflictual nature of international relations, international organizations were created, and some European countries went so far as to create a supranational entity (i.e. the European Union).

Despite international institutions, globalization, global governance, Erasmus programmes, double citizenships, mixed marriages... nationalism is still alive and well. In the European Union, nationalism has been revitalized and used by different groups to express their discontent for the loss of national identity – which is defined by those people as something objective, primitive and fixed.

The identity of Europeans has been shifting across time from the local community to the nation-state and finally to the European level. In times of crisis, people fall back on their national interests and sentiments – and sometimes nationalist narratives. Structural dynamics help to explain these ups and downs because the political, economic and social consequences of historical transformations (e.g. the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, financial crises, the COVID-19 pandemic) shape

the feelings, opinions and actions of people.

In times of fear, people think they must choose between opposites: their national versus European identity. People opt for the identity associated with their passport, as this offers the best guarantee of security and survival. Europeans have European passports, but they are still conceived as a cover for national ones.

The EU offers a unique multilateral platform to coordinate and cooperate on shared practices as well as responsibilities. Yet, EU member states initially reacted to COVID-19 along national lines. Some countries closed their borders and failed to help neighbours in need. Such national reactions were soon proven inadequate to tackle the pandemic. When certain countries like Italy halted flights to/from China, travellers simply changed their itinerary, flying from Paris, Berlin or Madrid to Beijing and back, only to then fly to Milan. This undermined efforts of Italian authorities, underscoring the transnational nature of the current crisis and the need for common measures.

EU institutions were absent in the initial phase. Then came the time for apologies, reiterated apologies. Finally, promises were made and some important steps were taken. The European Commission adopted three bold measures: i) suspending the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact to eliminate deficit and debt constraints for EU member states; ii) changing the rules preventing state aid to national firms; and iii) allowing a more flexible

use of funds from the 2014–2020 budget. The European Commission acted as a truly *European* institution. Meanwhile, the European Central Bank, after early declarations that plummeted European markets, started an unprecedented Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme (PEPP), injecting vital liquidity in struggling national economies.

Most problems are related to the eurozone area, however. Strong and unified measures are needed but the EU still struggles to act due to its hybrid national and supranational nature. Agreement has been reached on three policies: i) the use of the European Stability Mechanism to cover COVID-19 related costs without the previous conditionality measures; ii) funding from the European Investment Bank to small and medium-sized enterprises; and iii) the Temporary Support to Mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) instrument. Ideally, the SURE instrument should help to revisit the motto of the EU: from “United in diversity” we should, most importantly, be “United in adversity”.

The above measures for eurozone countries amount to 540 billion euro. Not enough to respond to an estimated 15 per cent contraction output for eurozone countries in the second quarter of 2020 after an almost four per cent contraction in the first three months of the year.³ Hence, the ensuing battle over euro-bonds, corona-bonds, Ursula-bonds and the Recovery Fund

³ Larry Elliott, “As Eurozone Records 3.8% Slump ECB Chief Warns of Worse to Come”, in *The Guardian*, 30 April 2020, <https://gu.com/p/dmqcx>.

took centre stage in Europe.

Some eurozone members seem to be buying time, trying to avoid a truly bold and *European* answer. Fights erupted and nationalistic stereotypes resurged, once again, as the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing criticalities within the Union. Conversely, calls for solidarity, last heard during the financial and migration crises, returned with a vengeance, as citizens and organizations self-organized to provide support and assistance to neighbours while pressuring leaders and political parties not to stray off course. Thus, opposed to nationalism and old divisions, calls for *more Europe*, were also heard across the continent.

Demands for united leadership are coming from many directions. In Italy, a group of young international students enrolled at The American University of Rome were disturbed to see the initial reactions to the pandemic, the resurgent nationalisms and the difficulty in articulating a EU-wide reaction.

During our class debates on the EU, rigorously held via virtual tools during the pandemic, Adriana – a US national – argued that with all their differences, US citizens tend to rally together during an emergency, questioning why Europeans were initially driven apart. Bashir, an Egyptian student who escaped the regime and is now living in the Union with what might seem to be an idealized understanding of the EU could not believe his own eyes when witnessing the lack of solidarity between EU member states. Miriam, another student who came

back to Europe after living in Asia for some years, had started to appreciate European rights and privileges, until... the COVID-19 pandemic made her question the nature of being European. Dario, an Italian in love with the US, is discovering, questioning and building his European identity and passion thanks to the crisis. Finally, Irene, half Italian-and-half Greek, would never imagine not identifying as European.

To promote a narrative of hope and possibility in the midst of the present crisis, these students launched a global COVID-19 Petition asking individuals to call on EU institutions, member states and leaders to live up to their responsibilities, holding them to the promises made in EU Treaties and work to truly integrate European societies as well as their economies.⁴

From their quarantined homes, students across Europe joined the initiative, signing the petition and recording a video to help spread the message about European identity and the need to stay united and cooperative today more than ever.⁵

These students come from different countries, not all of them are European citizens, but they all enjoy the specific nature of European values. The EU is not just about travelling and studying without borders, but also about community and rights, leisure and culture. This generation of students represent the success of the European

⁴ Project EurHope website: *The Covid-19 Petition*, <https://www.projecteurhope.com/petition/en>.

⁵ Project EurHope, "We Asked Young Europeans What Europe Means to Them" (video), in *YouTube*, 5 May 2020, <https://youtu.be/T5nNepEMGpM>.

integration process and project.

United under the heading of Project EurHope, these young citizens wish to rally others, European or international, to discuss and exchange ideas about the EU and the way ahead.⁶ New generations are asking European leaders to stop acting as if they were responding to a national crisis, affecting only their country of origin or those married to people of their own nationality. They call on leaders to go beyond national blinders.

For this and many other reasons, COVID-19 is a test for those Europeans who wish to challenge what is supposed to be normal (selfishness), given (lack of cooperation) or natural (nationalism). It is an opportunity to reimagine Europe and what it means to be "European", both for EU citizens and other world communities. As the late Leonard Cohen would say, "There is a crack in everything [and] that's how the light gets in"⁷.

5 May 2020

⁶ ProjectEurHope: <https://www.projecteurhope.com>.

⁷ Leonard Cohen, "Anthem", in *Poems and Songs*, edited by Robert Faggen, New York, Knopf, 2011, p. 188.

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)

- 20 | 34 Irene Caratelli, *European Identity and the Test of COVID-19*
- 20 | 33 Riccardo Alcaro, *COVID-19 Exposes Italy's Vulnerability to US-China Antagonism*
- 20 | 32 Federico Alagna, *From Sophia to Irini: EU Mediterranean Policies and the Urgency of "Doing Something"*
- 20 | 31 Karim Mezran, *Importing Instability? How External Influences Nurture the War in Libya*
- 20 | 30 Giulia Cimini, *COVID-19 and Tunisian Democracy: High Risks Ahead*
- 20 | 29 Jean-Pierre Darnis, *A COVID-19 Moment for Technological Sovereignty in Europe?*
- 20 | 28 Davide Zurlo, *Beyond Hydrocarbons: Libya's Blue Gold*
- 20 | 27 Tobias Bunde, Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, Boris Ruge and Nathalie Tocci, *European Vision and Ambition Needed: Italy and Germany Must Promote a Global EU Response to COVID-19*
- 20 | 26 Nicoletta Pirozzi, *Beyond Coronabonds: A New Constituent for Europe*
- 20 | 25 Nona Mikhelidze, *Russia and the COVID-19 Crisis: Hardship at Home, Soft Power Flexing Abroad*