



Wilfried  
**Martens Centre**  
for European Studies

# The EU and the Multifaceted Nature of European Identity

**André P. DeBattista**



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## Credits

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The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

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# About the Martens Centre



The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, established in 2007, is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP). The Martens Centre embodies a pan-European mind-set, promoting Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values. It serves as a framework for national political foundations linked to member parties of the EPP. It currently has 31 member foundations and 3 permanent guest foundations in 24 EU and non-EU countries. The Martens Centre takes part in the preparation of EPP programmes and policy documents. It organises seminars and training on EU policies and on the process of European integration.

The Martens Centre also contributes to formulating EU and national public policies. It produces research studies and books, electronic newsletters, policy briefs and the twice-yearly *European View* journal. Its research activities are divided into six clusters: party structures and EU institutions, economic and social policies, EU foreign policy, environment and energy, values and religion, and new societal challenges. Through its papers, conferences, authors' dinners and website, the Martens Centre offers a platform for discussion among experts, politicians, policymakers and the European public.

**About the author**



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# Executive summary





This study seeks to contribute to the discussion on the multifaceted nature of European identity and culture and why the EU should engage in, rather than retreat from, having such discussions. It posits that Europe is a place where national identity can be affirmed, rather than rejected, since this in itself does not contradict or diminish the idea of a shared European identity. Rather, a European identity can complement and even strengthen national identity.

The complementarity of such identities is due to the uniqueness of the shared European space and of the *sui generis* nature of the EU itself. The conception of this shared space, however, is dependent on full respect for the principle of subsidiarity. The EU has registered some successes where subsidiarity has been maintained, but has struggled when it has attempted to emulate nation states in their creation of ‘imagined communities’.

The more difficult elements—such as some contentious shared history—should be acknowledged rather than ignored, no matter how difficult this may be. Similarly, the Judeo-Christian heritage of Europe can add value to the debate on culture, identity and values.

In addition, this study posits that there are other areas where a sense of European identity can grow, for example, through the strengthening of European citizenship and through extending opportunities for transnational contacts.

# Introduction



This study seeks to contribute to the discussion on the multifaceted nature of European identity and culture and why the EU should engage in, rather than retreat from, having such discussions. References to European identity, values and ‘soul’<sup>1</sup> in EU discourse are often nebulous and contentious. Nonetheless, they remain valuable points of reference, both in the formulation of the future development of Europe and in solving the EU’s apparent issues of legitimacy and democratic deficit. This augments the relevance of studies of such issues.

This study envisages Europe as a place where national identity can be affirmed, rather than rejected. It seeks to outline the meaning of national identity within a strong regional context where a parallel European identity is developing. This European identity must not be seen as one which competes with national identity, but rather one which enriches it and can act as an additive. This is a difficult challenge that is often hindered by misconceptions of what European identity is.

The idea of Europe is complex, multifaceted and paradoxical. It is a geographical, cultural, historical and political construct that remains a challenge to define. It consists of a complex web of institutions; the terms ‘Europe’ and ‘EU’ are often used interchangeably, even though there is a significant difference between the two. Moreover, these institutions do not cover the entire geographical area of Europe, and therefore ‘Europeanness’ cannot be solely about institutions but must extend to embrace ideas, history and culture.<sup>2</sup>

The paper is divided as follows. The section ‘Bringing Europe Together?’ argues that issues concerning culture and identity should be central to the political process, despite being difficult and contentious at times. These sources of contention are explored in the section ‘The Nature of the European “Community”’, where the *sui generis* nature of the EU is outlined and explored. This is followed by the section ‘Identity: The Challenge in Europe’, which identifies how the EU has tried to engage with such issues, while acknowledging that it has done so in a haphazard and clumsy manner. Despite this, there have been some successes; the principal three are identified in the following section as being the European Capitals of Culture programme, the euro, and the DiscoverEU and Erasmus+ initiatives. The study concludes with the section ‘Findings and Further Recommendations’.

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<sup>1</sup> U. von der Leyen, ‘Strengthening the Soul of Our Union’, 2021 State of the Union address, Strasbourg, 15 September 2021.

<sup>2</sup> T. Pedersen, *When Culture Becomes Politics: European Identity in Perspective* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008), 9.

**Bringing Europe  
together?**



One of the challenges Europe faces concerns the ability to have competing and seemingly disparate cultures converge in one shared space. This poses a secondary, more challenging problem: how can different elements contribute to identification with the same cultural unit?

Europe has several cultural centres with great historic and cultural significance, which are augmented by eminent universities and important archbishoprics, academies and theatres, operas and libraries. The EU acknowledges this through its 'European City of Culture' programme, which confers this title on two cities annually, together with a small fund, to shine a spotlight on such cities and enable them to devise and showcase a specific cultural programme to celebrate their heritage. In essence, it is a 'salient example of the attempts at awakening a European consciousness by diffusing its symbols, while respecting the contents of national and local cultures.'<sup>3</sup>

Themes concerning culture and identity should be central to the policy process. This observation can be extended to the EU. Indeed, it has long recognised the need to bolster its institutions with a sense of European belonging and a shared identity. Since the mid-1980s, it has adopted some symbolic elements, including the flag, an anthem and a motto. The introduction of the single currency itself has had significant repercussions both for the economy and for how Europeans interact; it is an exercise in identity and a critical economic development. The State of the Union address tacitly acknowledges a European public. The Conference on the Future of Europe attempted to bring citizens together to 'share their ideas and help shape' Europe's 'common future'.<sup>4</sup> Such developments are not to be underestimated.

Nonetheless, this process is not a smooth one. One of the most contentious provisions in the failed Constitutional Treaty concerned the official status of the EU flag and the anthem. Though excluded from the Treaty of Lisbon, these symbols retain some symbolic and legal power in several EU member states. However, symbols are secondary to articulating an 'idea of Europe'.<sup>5</sup> The EU must also accept that it is

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<sup>3</sup> M. Sassatelli, 'Imagined Europe: The Shaping of a European Cultural Identity Through EU Cultural Policy', *European Journal of Social Theory* 5/4 (2002), 436.

<sup>4</sup> *European Commission*, 'Conference on the Future of Europe: Make Sure Your Voice Is Heard!', 17 February 2022.

<sup>5</sup> G. Delanty, *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 9.



different from its member states and will struggle to replace each member state's role and their commanding emotional attachments.

Other policy tools remain considerably underdeveloped. The Treaties explicitly refer to the 'cultural, religious, and humanist inheritance of Europe' and the respect of 'cultural and linguistic diversity', together with a commitment to safeguard and enhance Europe's cultural heritage. They also state that the EU 'must contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore'. However, any action by the EU in this sector has to respect the principle of subsidiarity. In essence, this entails the 'improvement of knowledge and dissemination' through the encouragement of cooperation between member states.<sup>6</sup>

Identity and culture are also intrinsically linked to the values embraced by a particular society. By their very definition, values are very political; indeed, politics is an authoritative allocation of values for a society.<sup>7</sup> The EU does not remain neutral on the question of values. It recognises 'respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law' as fundamental values that bind member states together. Moreover, it commits its institutions to defend and promote these values within and beyond its borders. These fundamental values are defined in the Treaty of Lisbon.

The discussions on culture, identity and values are complex and delicate. However, they also cannot be avoided. The rise of identitarianism and populism have led to a shift in the discourse. The basic premise of such groups is often based on two ideals: the defence of values and civilisation and the protection of culture and heritage. These are framed within a somewhat Eurosceptic narrative, opposing European integration and depicting the EU as a 'remote post-national technocracy bent on overcoming separate national identities and cultural heritages in favour of some sort of continental melting pot'.<sup>8</sup> This study argues that the centre-right, in particular the European People's Party, should claim such debates and reframe them in terms of the fact that national identity and European identity complement one another and that they are best secured through the strict application of the principle of subsidiarity.

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<sup>6</sup> F. O. Reho and T. Larue, *A Europe That Protects Its Heritage*, Wilfred Martens Centre for European Studies, Policy Brief (Brussels, 2020), 4.

<sup>7</sup> This is the definition of politics posited by political scientist David Easton.

<sup>8</sup> Reho and Larue, *A Europe That Protects its Heritage*, 9.



# The nature of the European 'community': defining the EU





Identity is often interpreted in two ways: the first focuses on the progressive conception of identity, including gender, sexuality and class, and the second focuses on national identity. The European ‘community’ struggles to fit into either category, since it seeks to transcend all conceptions of gender, sexuality, class and conventional nationalisms. Nonetheless, Europe confusedly tries to forge a post-national identity by mimicking some aspects of nation building, rather than recognise that it is a *sui generis* community. It is therefore appropriate to look at the nature of the European community, before analysing issues concerning the identity of Europe. The concept of community is particularly relevant in this context, since it denotes a social group sharing the same territory, while ‘implying both a body of common interest, a degree of social cooperation and interaction in the pursuit of them and a sense of belonging among the members’.<sup>9</sup>

Europe is a contested concept embodying ‘complex ideas and ideals’.<sup>10</sup> It can be seen as both a ‘region and polity’, but ‘it is also an idea and an identity’<sup>11</sup>, with some form of collective European identity having existed since the sixteenth century. The idea of Europe was also, for a brief time, hijacked by some movements. For example, despite their extreme nationalism, both Nazism and Fascism had a European horizon and could be cast as supranational ideologies aiming to refashion European civilisation. Consequently, in the post-war period, ‘unity’ in the old continent was met with great suspicion by many on both the left and the right. However, the Cold War necessitated a change in these attitudes. Indeed, in the latter part of the twentieth century, the idea of Europe was intrinsically linked to ‘the West’. This was instrumental in ‘purifying’ Europe from its past and transforming it into a ‘programme for the future’.<sup>12</sup>

The foundation of the European Economic Community emphasised the economic rather than the political aspect, perhaps inspired by the failed attempt at political unification in 1954 through the European Defence Community. This focus matched the political priorities of the period, not least, post-war economic reconstruction and recovery. Nonetheless, the economy also requires some political coordination and, in turn, some guiding principles. This attempt to manage shared resources indirectly reignited the debate on identity, culture and values—a debate which had commenced in the run up to the foundation of the Council of Europe.

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<sup>9</sup> R. Scruton, *Dictionary of Political Thought* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 122.

<sup>10</sup> Delanty, *Inventing Europe*, 1

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 121–5.



In less than 50 years after the ratification of the Treaty of Rome, the European Economic Community had developed into the European Community, and later, after the ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht, the European Union. As a result, the terms 'Europe' and 'EU' began to be used interchangeably in common parlance. Moreover, the EU wholeheartedly embraced liberal democracy, arguing that political and economic development was impossible unless all member states embraced its fundamental values.

These developments were supported by other initiatives that directly or indirectly aimed to reignite a sense of shared cultural space and a common identity. The 1980s and 1990s saw a proliferation of initiatives in this regard, not least, the recognition of a flag, an anthem, a passport and a new name in 1993. Moreover, the introduction of the European Capitals of Culture and, later, the single currency strengthened such initiatives, bolstering the ideas of a 'shared space', a 'shared economy' and the necessity of trust in this new political experiment.

Despite all this, questions over culture and identity remain unresolved. On the one hand, the EU tries to transcend the nation state; yet, paradoxically, it uses the symbolic language of the nation state. Though well-meaning, some of these initiatives have had the opposite effect of what they intended to achieve.

Any debate on identity and culture must begin by recognising the uniqueness of the shared European space and the EU itself.

Comparisons between the EU and federal states are popular. These are buoyed by support from federalists who would like to see the EU evolve in that manner. Nonetheless, attempts to compare the EU to countries such as the US and the Federal Republic of Germany remain highly flawed. There are some elements suitable for comparison; like federal states, the EU does combine shared rule in common institutions with self-rule in member states; however, it also clearly goes beyond intergovernmental cooperation. It is correct to state that the current EU owes some debt of gratitude to the US regarding how it evolved and how it is interpreted. Nonetheless, the EU itself is not designed to replace member states, 'but rather to transform them into integral parts of a cooperative venture'. In terms of identity, 'citizens' identities gain a new layer that interacts with their existing member state identity'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> S. Usherwood and J. Pinder, *The European Union: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 8.



Equally, however, the EU has also been described as an international organisation ‘founded on treaties between European states’.<sup>14</sup> However, this does not truly reflect how the EU developed, since it covers ‘many areas of public policy’ and reaches ‘deep into the political, economic, and social lives of its peoples’.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, unlike other attempts at regional cooperation, from the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council to MERCOSUR and ASEAN, the EU involves considerable pooling of sovereignty.

These different aspects mean that the EU needs to be treated as a *sui generis* political reality that draws its power from the pooling of sovereignty and the collaboration between sovereign governments, but attempts to strengthen its legitimacy by engaging with the broader public through representative institutions. In this regard, it attempts to create a post-national reality using elements that are not too dissimilar to the symbols and nationalisms used in its member states.

The European *demos* remains diversified and fragmented, though, paradoxically, united in terms of institutional representation. Thus, the strength of this *sui generis* entity lies in its diversity and its ability to adapt to and exploit the various ideas, perceptions and cultural contributions, along with the shared heritage, of its constituents. The desire to reform and upgrade has led to culture and identity being regarded as unnecessary, contentious issues. Since they have been part of the European project from its very inception, they need not be.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

# Identity: the challenge in Europe



Across the decades, the EU's engagement with issues of culture and identity has been haphazard and somewhat clumsy. Attempts to create a post-national identity and transpose such an identity to political projects are often fraught with difficulties. For example, at its foundation in 1945, the League of Arab States seemed to be a pioneer in what it tried to achieve—at once uniting the championing of sovereignty and independence with articulating a common cultural identity. However, despite these shared aims and the strong cultural link, the League of Arab States has struggled to evolve into a more powerful political and strategic union. Moreover, Arab nationalism has, across the years, become increasingly tainted with notions of authoritarianism. By contrast, until 1973, the European project avoided embracing such grand, pan-continental nationalisms, preferring to adopt a broad anti-Communist and anti-authoritarian position coupled with some ambitious yet restrained projects such as the Coal and Steel Community and the Euratom Treaty. This permitted it to foster more profound levels of trust and cooperation before venturing further into greater pooling of sovereignty.<sup>16</sup>

Political communities have often been conceived as 'imagined communities' bolstered by narratives, symbols and languages of power. Despite being a recent creation—the joint product of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution—nation states have gradually emerged as the dominant political unit in international relations.<sup>17</sup> Such nations usually include a demarcated and defined territory—a homeland—with which citizens can identify and to which they feel they belong. This identification is strengthened by shared common myths and historical memories (which serve to create common enemies), a collective mass culture, legal rights and duties for citizens, and a general economy.<sup>18</sup>

However, the European space is different from the nation state. It was not born out of violence or a violent struggle but rather out of the fear of violence and as a reaction to violent struggles. It is, essentially, a shared space and an 'opening up' to other sovereign states in the region. Languages of power and national narratives take second place to these factors, without precluding that the same institutions will themselves weave their own narratives and create their own symbols.

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<sup>16</sup> G. Carlstrom, 'Special Report – The Arab World: Staying at Home', *The Economist*, 28 August 2021, 12.

<sup>17</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> A. D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991).



The EU has managed to develop governance structures that create both a political system and a regional polity—‘a special kind of decentralised federation’.<sup>19</sup> However, such developments have not been enough to create a feeling of shared European identity, and in the process have created political tensions based on two contending allegiances, one towards the nation and another towards Europe, though the two are not mutually exclusive. This problem was succinctly summed up by the former President of the European Commission Jacques Delors in an address to the European Parliament: ‘you cannot fall in love with the Single Market.’<sup>20</sup>

Eurobarometer surveys indicate that there has been some increase in citizens’ feelings of belonging within the EU. For example, between 2010 and 2015, the percentage of people who replied ‘yes, definitely’ to the question of whether they felt they were citizens of the EU increased from 21% to 27%. In addition, those who felt they were citizens of the EU ‘to some extent’ remained stable at 40%–41%. Meanwhile, those who did not feel they were EU citizens, or who most definitely did not identify so, decreased from 37% to 31%. Therefore, there is some form of civic identification with Europe in this respect.

Nonetheless, there is pessimism about the EU’s prospects of fostering something similar to national identity. In terms of sharing memories, ‘there is no European analogue to Bastille or Armistice Day, no European ceremony for the fallen in battle, no European shrine of kings or saints. When it comes to the ritual and ceremony of collective identification, there is no European equivalent of national or religious community’.<sup>21</sup>

Whether Europe requires such elements, however, is a moot point. Although Europe shows no evidence of assimilation on a linguistic or ethnic front, such integration is non-essential since Europe does not aim to become a nation state.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Pedersen, *When Culture Becomes Politics*, 10–13.

<sup>20</sup> J. Delors, ‘Statement on the Broad Lines of Commission Policy’, address given at the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 17 January 1989, Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l’Europe (from the *Bulletin of the European Communities*, 1989, No Supplement 1/89) (21 October 2012).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> This is a point which is made by Karl W. Deutsch. See also E. Jones ‘Identity and Solidarity’, in E. Jones, A. Menon and S. Weatherill (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 692.



To take this point further, the *sui generis* nature of this European community implies that some adaptation needs to be made to accommodate its structure. As a ‘multilevel polity . . . [it] is no surprise that European citizens should have a multilevel identity structure as well’, similar to the phenomenon in other countries that have strong regional identities, such as Germany or Switzerland. By pitting national identities against European identities, an unnecessary conflict is created, for ‘it is possible for people to hold many different identities at once and to use them differentially as well’.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, the focus on differences has often prevented the recognition of similarities across this shared space. To this effect, if dealt with sensitively, culture—particularly the historical, architectural and artistic patrimony—can be a uniting rather than a dividing factor. For example, visitors around Europe are struck by the similarities in terms of the architecture and art across various centuries. Elements of the Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque and Romantic movements can be found throughout the territories of Europe and have served as an inspiration beyond European borders. In addition, heritage is always a uniting factor: ‘When it comes to the Parthenon, we are all Greeks, as much as when it comes to the Colosseum, we are all Italians. In Notre Dame in Paris, we are all Catholics, as much as we are all Anglicans in Canterbury cathedral, Muslims in the Alhambra of Granada and Orthodox at Mount Athos’.<sup>24</sup>

The centrality of culture thus cannot be underestimated. It becomes a ‘necessary shared medium’ through which members of a society can interact, show solidarity and participate in public life.<sup>25</sup>

In recognition of this, there has also been a top-down attempt to ‘construct’ a European identity. Following the first enlargement process in 1973, the foreign ministers of the nine member states gathered at the Copenhagen Summit issued the ‘Document on the European Identity’, which attempted to address such issues with a view ‘to achieve a better definition of their relations with other countries and of their responsibilities and the place which they occupy in world affairs’. For the nine foreign ministers, defining European identity was a deliberate process that kept in mind the nature of the Community and promoted a more united Europe.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 695–6.

<sup>24</sup> Reho and Larue, *A Europe That Protects Its Heritage*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 38.

<sup>26</sup> Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe, ‘Declaration on European Identity’ (from the *Bulletin of the European Communities* no. 12 (December 1973), 118–22) (18 December 2013), 2.



This document proposed to ‘review common heritage, interests and special obligations’ of the nine. It acknowledged the difficulties of history among the member states: ‘The Nine European States might have been pushed towards disunity by their history and by selfishly defending misjudged interests. But they have overcome their past enmities and have decided that unity is a basic European necessity to ensure the survival of the civilisation which they have in common’.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, it also argued that the nine now shared ‘the same attitudes to life’ as well as the principles of democracy, the rule of law, social justice and human rights. These were described as the ‘fundamental elements of the European Identity’.<sup>28</sup>

This document is significant both in its ambition and, perhaps, its inability to reach its aims. In essence, it failed to address the particular nature of European identity as being a ‘personal, composite and additive’ identity. It is personal, since it is often a matter of existential choice instead of custom and tradition. It is composite, since ‘European identity must be seen as composed of different layers or sources.’ Furthermore, it is additive, since ‘in the European post-war context, common identity has not generally been seen as an either/or question, but more pragmatically as a multiple phenomenon’.<sup>29</sup>

The EU has had limited success in introducing the trappings of shared identity. These include, but are not limited to, the adoption of a flag, an anthem, a European passport (1985), a motto (2000) and a common currency. The design of the latter is redolent with symbolism and metaphor—though in and of itself, a single currency also binds its users into some relationship of interdependence and trust. As a symbol, the euro currency has, however, been criticised for being too abstract and post-identitarian. Other initiatives, such as the European Capitals of Culture and Erasmus+ schemes, also create much-needed collaboration among European citizens.

There are other, more controversial projects, such as the attempts to write a shared history of Europe under the direction of Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, who sought to emphasise the principles of continuity and collaboration rather than division and war. The attempts to recognise the shared Judeo-Christian heritage of Europe and the appeals of Pope John Paul II to have this heritage recognised in the Constitutional Treaty were equally controversial, and ultimately failed.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Pedersen, *When Culture Becomes Politics*, 52–3.





Similarly, though Europeans share some broad values, issues concerning migration, religion, public life and the LGBTQI community, and the deepening of the EU often prove to be sources of contention and confrontation—and, in some cases, their discussion becomes poisonous and counterproductive.

The following section will look at three successful initiatives that have contributed to the understanding of Europe as a community, followed by another section containing some recommendations.



# Successes



When looking at the initiatives that have been adopted so far, some emerge as success stories, having contributed to the understanding of a common and shared space. The EU's venture into the sphere of cultural policy can be detected through sponsorships, subsidies, exchange programmes and shared initiatives, as well as a limited regulation of the cultural goods market. The EU's foray into such areas is uncontroversial and welcome. In fact, it is often criticised for not being sufficient. In terms of identity, the EU has undertaken some initiatives to create a symbolic lexicon. These, in contrast, have sometimes been controversially received. The following section looks at some success stories which can be built upon.

## The European Capitals of Culture

Established by intergovernmental action in 1983, the programme commenced in 1985, and the European Council selected only one city until 1999. In 2000, nine locations were chosen to highlight European cities' contributions. Since then, two cities have shared the Capital of Culture title each year, except in 2021, when no cities were selected due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The main official aims of the European Capitals of Culture initiative are to 'highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe, celebrate the cultural features Europeans share, increase European citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural area and foster the contribution of culture to the development of cities.' A host member state is selected. A call for applications is issued within that country for cities to submit proposals for consideration. The European Commission ensures that the 'rules established at EU level are respected all along the way'.<sup>30</sup>

This initiative is a quintessential example of how a European consciousness can be awoken while 'respecting the contents of national and local cultures', and thus also the principle of subsidiarity. It engages the city involved in the design and the implementation of the programme. At the same time, the European Commission oversees the process and sets the ambitious mission of highlighting 'the richness and diversity of European cultures and the features they share, and promot[ing] greater mutual acquaintance between

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<sup>30</sup> European Commission, 'European Capitals of Culture', 2022.



European Union citizens'.<sup>31</sup> The programme seems to be a success story which has now engaged over 60 cities.

A 2016 report by the European Economic and Social Committee examined the link between culture, cities and identity in Europe. Commissioned at a time of 'falling popularity and a crisis of the perceived legitimacy of the European Union', this study identified culture as being a possible answer to some challenges since it could be a 'vehicle for economic growth,' 'an instrument for reconverting cities,' a 'tool for integration and inclusiveness', and 'a pillar of European identity within Europe and beyond'.<sup>32</sup>

The celebration of cities is recognised as reaching beyond the field of culture and extending to other areas, including those related to economic growth and the promotion of specific values. For example, when Leeuwarden-Friesland (the Netherlands) and Valletta (Malta) shared the title of European Capitals of Culture in 2018, the Dutch city refused to send an official delegation to Malta following comments mocking the assassinated Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia by the chair of the Valletta 2018 organising committee.<sup>33</sup>

Though these programmes have been a success story, one glaring pitfall needs to be addressed. The promotion of European cities enhances the image of Europe as a cosmopolitan and artistic space and has offered opportunities for collaboration among different member states. It can also serve to enhance shared *lieux de mémoire* across Europe. Nonetheless, it can also be misinterpreted as prioritising a cosmopolitan city culture over rural culture, or perhaps a celebration of elite culture over more popular folk culture. This is notwithstanding that the Common Agricultural Policy is the costliest initiative in the EU budget, meaning that, financially, the balance is tipped in favour of the countryside. Nonetheless, in its projection, the EU tends to adopt an image which is more urban and cosmopolitan.

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<sup>31</sup> Sassatelli, *Imagined Europe*, 441,

<sup>32</sup> European Economic and Social Committee, *Culture, Cities and Identity in Europe* (Brussels, 2016), 1.

<sup>33</sup> "LF2018 believes that V18 representatives have put the values of a European Capital of Culture under pressure as a result of the way in which the V18 organisation has presented itself in the (social) media regarding the journalist," the Dutch foundation said' (*Times of Malta*, 'Minister Intervenes as Dutch European Capital of Culture Boycotts Valletta 2018', 26 April 2018).



## The euro

The discussion of the single currency in this short study is not intended to focus on its economic effects, but rather on its role as an agent for enhancing the idea of a shared common space. Though the primary function of money is economic, it can also be a ‘symbol of place, locality and power’. In the case of the euro, it serves as ‘the most important symbol of European integration and identity beyond the individual EU member states to date’.<sup>34</sup>

Currency may not be the ideal vehicle for encouraging collective identity; it ‘is highly abstract rather than manifest and concrete’, and ‘it does not allow one to distinguish between “self” and “others”’.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, it also allows for the development of some symbolism through the design of the coinage/banknotes and, most importantly, it brokers trust among member states and binds citizens sharing the same currency in a long-lasting relationship.

The euro’s design is also a perfect synthesis of the complex nature of the European shared space and attempts to create a narrative of the evolving Union. The explanations provided by the European Central Bank give us a glimpse into the created narrative. The € symbol is ‘inspired by the Greek letter epsilon, harking back to Classical times and the cradle of European civilisation’<sup>36</sup>, while it also refers to ‘the first letter of the word “Europe”’. The two parallel lines ‘indicate the stability of the euro’<sup>37</sup>. The euro banknotes contain no national symbols but are redolent with the most important symbols of the EU—the flag and the map. The notes’ designs depict no specific location in any member state, but show architectural themes that are recognisable throughout the continent. The choice of ‘windows and gateways symbolise[s] the European spirit of openness and cooperation’<sup>38</sup> while the ‘bridges symbolise the close cooperation and communication between Europe and the rest of the world’.<sup>39</sup> The choice of an architectural theme also tries to create a shared linear narrative of historical development evolving from classical times to the present day and indirectly

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<sup>34</sup> M. Kaelberer, ‘The Euro and European Identity: Symbols, Power and the Politics of European Monetary Union’, *Review of International Studies* 30/2 (2004), 162.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>36</sup> *European Commission*, ‘The Euro, Our Currency’ (2009).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Banco de España*, ‘The Series of Banknotes’.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*



points to a cultural heritage shared by all. Thus, while the gothic window on the €20 note does not depict a specific building, it could easily be imagined on any European gothic cathedral. While the European Central Bank sets the design of the banknotes, the reverse side of the coins is in the hands of individual eurozone members, thus indirectly encompassing this unique element of the nature of the EU itself.

However, symbolism is not the only element required in a currency. Indeed, trust remains fundamental: ‘money is not so much an economic or material entity, but rather a social relation. . . . [Citizens] accept money in a market exchange based on the assumption that others would do exactly the same. . . . Trust is the important category at stake, because money is essentially a form of credit’.<sup>40</sup> Though far removed from the normative discourse of identity as the creation of affective ties, the brief discussion on the euro also demonstrates the need to create ties of necessity.

Despite the eurozone crisis, the euro is still seen as a positive development. This crisis led to the Europeanisation of national political discourse, thus making the debates over the development of Europe seem more relevant to national realities. Crises are important critical junctures in terms of identity building, for they tend to shift the debate in particular courses of action. The eurozone crisis has led to a recognition of the importance of the survival of the single currency. Indeed, party leaders from the Eurosceptic camp have often ruled out leaving the euro. In addition, a 2018 Eurobarometer survey indicates that support for the euro is relatively high, with 74% believing its introduction was a good thing and only 15% believing that it is a bad thing for their country.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kaelberer, ‘The Euro and European Identity’, 171.

<sup>41</sup> European Commission, ‘Eurobarometer: Support for the Euro Steady at All-Time High Levels’, 20 November 2018.



## DiscoverEU and Erasmus+

Both of these successful programmes have contributed, directly and indirectly, to creating cultural ties and promoting the idea of a shared space.

Launched in 2018, DiscoverEU involves the awarding of a travel pass to young citizens of the EU to ‘discover Europe’s stunning landscapes and its variety of cities and towns.’ It is both a celebration of one of the fundamental freedoms of the EU—the freedom of movement—and an attempt to showcase the diverse cultures and heritage of the EU. Between June 2018 and January 2022, approximately 70,000 young people were awarded this travel pass. As of January 2022, DiscoverEU has been part of the Erasmus+ programme.<sup>42</sup>

The Erasmus+ programme is an EU initiative in the ‘fields of education, training, youth and sport’. In essence, it is a programme based on the premise of student and staff mobility and cooperation in the fields of ‘higher education, vocational education and training, school education and adult education, youth and sport.’ The programme for the years 2021–7 has an estimated budget of €26.2 billion, which is double the funding of the previous programme (2014–20). The current programme emphasises ‘social inclusion, the green and digital transitions, and promoting young people’s participation in democratic life’.<sup>43</sup>

These two brief résumés of these flagship programmes demonstrate two key factors. First, they successfully target younger people. Second, in addition to enhancing individual experiences, they also indirectly contribute to fostering a particular image of the European shared space. Both programmes attempt to foster a feeling of ‘being European’ through experience and transnational social contacts. Targeting younger age cohorts also has the added benefit of shaping civic attitudes that will indirectly shape political choices in the future.

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<sup>42</sup> EU, ‘DiscoverEU, *European Youth Portal*’.

<sup>43</sup> European Commission, ‘What is Erasmus+?’.

# **Findings and further recommendations**





The above discussion highlights three main strands. The first is that a discussion on identity and culture in the policy realm within the EU is unavoidable. The second is that the EU is a *sui generis* political creation and should be regarded as such. The third is that there have been some successes in engaging with themes of culture and identity within the policy realm. Given the above discussion, this study suggests the following.

## National identity should not be seen as the antithesis to a European identity

Political discourse often pits the one against the other; national identity is depicted as the prerogative of the bourgeois and an attitude adopted by those with a provincial mindset, while identification with Europe seems to be the preference of those with a more cosmopolitan outlook. In addition to being incorrect, this linear understanding fails to see identification with Europe as an additive to a feeling of belonging to a specific nation state or region. This has been exemplified in Ukraine, where identification with the EU and Europe is also an expression of patriotism consonant with Ukrainian national identity and the preservation of territorial integrity and national sovereignty.

This confirms that patriotic sentiment is not a negative characteristic. On the contrary, indifference to the national heritage can be seen not as a sign of progress but as one of decay. Indeed, patriotic sentiment and the survival of the nation state can be seen as a quasi-existential necessity. ‘The survival of human civilisation depends on the recognition of both sets of truth: that neither absolute state sovereignty nor the abolition of national identities is possible; that there must be a balance between national cultures and inter-state cooperation, no less than a balance between class interests and interclass cooperation within nations if destructive civil wars and nuclear holocausts are to be avoided’.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> H. Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977), 482–3.



Indifference to national and local heritage is also indifference to the European heritage. Consequently, an appreciation of the national can also be interpreted as an appreciation of that which is European and of identification with Europe. The two are different but can be complementary.

## The conception of a European shared cultural space is dependent upon respect for the principle of subsidiarity

One of the essential aspects which will secure the uniqueness and the nature of the European shared space is the principle of subsidiarity. It is the sole mechanism that respects the different cultures coexisting in Europe and the value systems that underpin such cultures. It does so without denying that some shared principles and cultural similarities still unite Europeans. It is the very principle through which the motto of ‘unity in diversity’ can be guaranteed. Consequently, though depicted as something that respects the very diversity upon which Europe is founded, the ‘Equality’ portfolio created by the Von der Leyen Commission seems to add very little value to the current conception of what being European is. Its output, such as the aborted ‘inclusive communication’ guidelines for European Commission staff, has often been met with antagonism and has had the opposite effect of what it intended to achieve. The 30-page ‘inclusive communication’ guidelines proposed by the EU commissioner for equality suggested, among other things, more gender-neutral language and ‘avoid[ing] assuming that everyone is Christian.’ Other, more outlandish, suggestions included avoidance of the word ‘citizen’ (in order not to ‘offend’ those within the EU who are ‘not citizens’) and terms with ‘negative connotations’, such as ‘colonisation of Mars’ (the document suggests using ‘human inhabitation of Mars’).<sup>45</sup> The guidelines were withdrawn following considerable public outcry.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, equality itself is understood differently across the European shared space. For example, the French word *égalité* has frequently been translated as ‘equality’, and it remains a politically loaded term due to its association with the French Revolution and its tripartite motto.

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<sup>45</sup> *Times of Malta*, ‘Helena Dalli’s “Christmas” Conundrum, Explained’, 7 December 2021.

<sup>46</sup> *Politico.eu*, ‘EU Accused of Trying to Cancel Christmas! Advice on Inclusive Language Dropped After Criticism’, 30 November 2021.



Therefore, the conclusions drawn by Reho are pertinent to the discussion on issues concerning culture and identity, particularly among the centre–right. Indeed, it is only through subsidiarity that diversity can be guaranteed:

To be of any help in the debate on EU competences, subsidiarity should rather be given a stricter interpretation by the centre–right, and understood as guaranteeing the integrity of Europe’s historically developed nations and regions. Taking subsidiarity seriously means that the Union should primarily be seen as the protector of its members’ integrity, autonomy, independence and identity, and not as an agent of uniformity and centralisation. Subsidiarity should thus urge not only EU institutions but each member state to accept and tolerate other members’ values and preferences, however different they may be from theirs.<sup>47</sup>

## The past needs to be acknowledged, no matter how difficult this may be

Though well meaning, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle’s attempts to reimagine the shared history of Europe could have had the opposite effects of what they intended to achieve. Rather than positing a counter-narrative to Europe’s contested past, the reinterpretation of the history of Europe could lead to the emergence of two competing narratives, which would be even more damaging than competing official histories. In essence, what Europe may need is not a reinterpretation of memory but a ‘purification of memory’. This concept, developed by the late Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), rests on two assumptions: the first is that the present cannot be used as a tribunal of the past, and the second is that the faults of the past cannot be denied. Thus, recognition becomes a major contributing factor to moving forward.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> F. O. Reho, ‘Subsidiarity in the EU: Reflections on a Centre–Right Agenda’, *European View* 18/1 (2019), 10.

<sup>48</sup> International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* (Vatican City, 2000).



This was the process that several founding fathers of the then–European Economic Community went through. In this respect, we must acknowledge the contribution of Christian Democracy through the efforts of Alcide de Gasperi, Konrad Adenauer and Robert Schuman, which have also been sustained through the intellectual efforts of Jacques Maritain. Though largely sceptical of the excesses of nationalism,<sup>49</sup> they also brought their own national experiences to the table. They argued that to avoid further tragedies like those that occurred in the twentieth century, countries needed to pool aspects of their sovereignty, particularly in some areas of industrial production, thus interlocking political and economic elements.

The model developed was neither blind to issues of culture nor ignorant of the need to have a values-based order. In this respect, Maritain argued for a lasting peace that acknowledges ‘the essential bases of common life, respect for human dignity and the rights of the person’.<sup>50</sup>

It is because of this history, rather than despite it, that the *sui generis* model we have today has developed. The founders created a balance that acknowledged the shared cultural and historical patrimony that united Europe. Nonetheless, they were not naive and understood that if peace and prosperity are to prevail, equilibrium needs to be sought between local freedoms, individual nations’ interests and the common interests of all.

Recognising this confirms the unique nature of the European community. Rather than being one of conquest and forced assimilation, it should be recognised as one of voluntary unity for economic prosperity and peaceful relations.

## Strengthening the concept of European citizenship

The complementarity of the national and the European, and the unique nature of the European community, can be best understood through the concept of European citizenship.

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<sup>49</sup> Maritain calls out, in particular, ‘blindly demanding nationalisms’. See J. Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy: And the Rights of Man and the Natural Law* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.



Symbolically, the member states of the European Communities had agreed on a uniform pattern for passport designs as early as 1982. Though the EU does not issue passport documents, the design is coordinated, with the coat-of-arms of the issuing country and the title ‘European Union’, followed by the name of the issuing country, emblazoned on the cover. The recommended colour of the passport is burgundy. The shared format is primarily symbolic—though such symbolism should not be underestimated, as the debate over the colour of the British passport in the wake of Brexit showed.<sup>51</sup>

However, the concept of European citizenship came later through the ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht. This treaty states that the citizens of all member states are also considered EU citizens. EU citizens are granted additional rights, including the ‘right of freedom of movement and residence throughout the EU, subject to special conditions, and the right to vote or stand for election in other member states in local and European (but not national) elections’.<sup>52</sup> This augmented the rights already guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

The Treaty of Amsterdam added that national citizenship and EU citizenship complement one another. A ‘Charter of Fundamental Rights’ was drafted in 2000, and the Treaty of Lisbon ‘gave the Charter legal force with regard to the actions of the EU itself, including aspects of the member states’ dealings with it’.<sup>53</sup>

EU citizenship thus accords citizens certain rights and privileges. Citizens are also, from time to time, asked to participate in the political processes of the EU. The elections for the European Parliament, held every five years, allow EU citizens to select representatives for this institution directly.

In addition, other initiatives try to engage the wider public’s views. For example, the European Citizens’ Initiative is a direct result of the Treaty of Lisbon, and gives citizens a ‘right of initiative’ regarding legislation—effectively giving citizens the same powers as the European Parliament and the European Council in asking the European Commission to initiate a legislative proposal. In practice, however, it is far more difficult for an initiative to be successful. To even be considered by the European Commission, a proposal

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<sup>51</sup> The burgundy colour for covers is suggested, but not mandated, by the EU. Croatia retained its blue cover even after joining the EU.

<sup>52</sup> Usherwood and Pinder, *The European Union*, 53–4.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.



requires the signature of a minimum of one million EU citizens from at least seven different member states. Even with overwhelming support, the European Commission is only obliged to consider the proposal but not to act. The complex and burdensome processes have been criticised; if the Initiative is to engage citizens, it needs to be more accessible.

Similarly, the Conference on the Future of Europe attempted to engage with citizens' views over the 'collective future' of the EU. Although the Commission, Council and Parliament committed to following up on the final recommendations, the Conference failed to attract the necessary enthusiasm and participation. The Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine shifted the conversation to other priorities, though the format and the wide range of topics did not help to entice broader participation.

Evaluating citizen engagement is crucial if a shared sense of European identity is to thrive. Unfortunately, though several initiatives—such as the European Citizens' Initiative and the Conference on the Future of Europe—have tried to engage citizens, they often seem like perfunctory, window-dressing exercises which will lead to nothing concrete. In addition, they remain missed opportunities to gain a nuanced understanding of which policy initiatives matter to citizens and what the future of Europe should look like.

## Experiences are critical to the appreciation of a shared space

The EU recognises the need to encourage shared experiences. Transnational contact encourages interest, understanding and friendship between nations while reducing 'the negative effect of regional attachment'.<sup>54</sup> In addition to this, such personal contact enhances the idea of a shared common space and shared solidarity.

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<sup>54</sup> S. Ciaglia, C. Fuest and F. Heinemann, *What a Feeling?! How to Promote 'European Identity'*, EconPol Policy Report 9 (Munich, October 2018).



The DiscoverEU and Erasmus+ programmes have been implemented with a great degree of success. In addition, as of 2022, the European Commission has launched the ALMA (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve) programme for people between 18 and 30 years of age who are not in employment, education or training, or who face disadvantages in terms of employment opportunities. It offers participants the opportunity for a 'supervised stay abroad for a period of two to six months in another EU Member State' and 'a comprehensive project cycle implying coaching and counselling at every step'. The aim is 'to foster their inclusion within their home country by improving their skills, knowledge and experience and give them an opportunity to create new connections across Europe'.<sup>55</sup> Though it is too early to assess the impact of this cross-border initiative, it aims to create a sense of transnational solidarity and enhance connections across the EU.

Many programmes are focused on younger people; there are few flagship schemes for cross-border connections aimed at adults over the age of 30. There is, however, scope for extending some schemes to different age cohorts, particularly in terms of improving occupational mobility throughout the EU and enhancing different transnational contacts.

## Symbols have their limitations

The failed Constitutional Treaty of the EU identified five official symbols, including the flag of the Union ('a circle of twelve golden stars on a blue background'), the anthem of the Union ('based on the Ode to Joy from the Ninth Symphony by Ludwig van Beethoven'), a motto ('Unity in diversity'), a currency (the 'euro') and a day to celebrate Europe ('9 May shall be celebrated throughout the Union as Europe day').<sup>56</sup> Though these symbols do not appear in later treaties, they have been granted official status (or semi-official status) by several institutions of the EU.

The euro is perhaps the strongest and most important of all symbols. It also remains the only one of the five symbols to replace the corresponding national equivalents rather than supplementing them. It also has

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<sup>55</sup> European Commission, 'ALMA (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve)'.

<sup>56</sup> Art. I-8, Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe (Constitutional Treaty).



historical resonances, since it reflects the EU's origins as an economic community and explicitly recognises 'the central role of capitalism and the market economy in the union'.<sup>57</sup> Finally, it remains the most successful of symbols partly because its failure would pose a profound existential threat to both the Union and the member states.

The other symbols do not constitute such threats, but they can be politically charged. The flag and the anthem were initially identified and adopted by the Council of Europe and eventually adopted by the EU. Therefore, they could be interpreted as representing the whole of Europe rather than the EU member states alone. Nonetheless, they are now associated chiefly with the EU, and, in some cases, this association can lead to political tensions.<sup>58</sup>

The designation of Europe Day marks the signing of the Schuman Declaration and, therefore, it is interpreted as marking 'the overcoming of mutual conflicts and the building of a safe, responsible and successful joint future'.<sup>59</sup> Though some events are held to mark this day, it has yet to capture the general public's imagination. The motto 'Unity in diversity'<sup>60</sup> was officially adopted in 2000 and eloquently sums up the nature of the European community—one of different ideals coexisting in a shared space rather than uniformity.

Such symbols have the nation state as the point of reference when, in fact, the EU and the nature of the European community seek to transcend this and create other, new points of reference. Though these symbols are here to stay, with the exception of the euro, their effectiveness is often limited and they can even be divisive. The symbolism chosen strives 'to project an image of Europe as strong, united and beneficial for all', yet, 'a closer interpretation guided by comparing these symbols with others and sometimes oppositional symbols, has disclosed a series of inner tensions and contradictions in this signifying process'.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, symbols themselves are not sufficient to create 'a shared civil society—based European identity of the kind

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<sup>57</sup> J. Fornas, *Signifying Europe* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2011), 206–48.

<sup>58</sup> Consider, for example, the tensions that arose between the Holyrood Parliament and Westminster over the flying of the European Flag outside the Edinburgh assembly following Brexit. See L. Brooks, 'Scottish Government Wins Vote to Keep EU Flag Flying Over Holyrood', *The Guardian*, 29 January 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Fornas, *Signifying Europe*, 99.

<sup>60</sup> Or 'In varietate concordia'.

<sup>61</sup> Fornas, *Signifying Europe*, 251.





that has been discussed as necessary to underpin the political, economic and institutional aspects of the EU'.<sup>62</sup>

## Values need to be discussed

The Treaty of Lisbon references shared values and the origin of such values. The preamble refers to the 'cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe', which shaped 'the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law'. In addition, Article 1a identifies the values upon which the Union is founded: 'respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities'. It describes these values as being 'common to the Member States' and key to fostering a society 'in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail'.<sup>63</sup>

Though broad in meaning, the Union's values can be understood differently across the member states. For example, the value of 'freedom' can have different meanings in France (where it may be understood in relation to the French Revolution), Hungary (where it may be conceived in terms of the struggle against totalitarianism) and Malta (where it remains a somewhat politically laden term in the nation's post-colonial narrative). Given this situation, the EU institutions need to develop a greater sensitivity to understanding the more nuanced definitions attributed to some of these values in the different member states.

A developed understanding of such values could give the EU an added advantage in shaping its conception globally. Though it seeks to project itself as making use of soft power in view of the values it holds, it cannot do so effectively until they are defined with an appreciation for their nuances and respected within the borders of the Union itself.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>63</sup> Art. 1a, Lisbon Treaty.



## The Judeo-Christian heritage should not be ignored in the debate on culture and identity

While the EU is undoubtedly a secular institution upholding secular values, the European shared space was conceived and shaped in an environment that prioritised religion. The Treaty of Lisbon itself acknowledges this ‘religious inheritance’. Nonetheless, there is a growing reluctance to discuss or acknowledge this inheritance. This is to the detriment of our understanding of the nature of the European community.

A cursory look at the writings and pronouncements of the last three pontiffs can give us some insight into the nature of this shared space—and why the Judeo-Christian heritage should be celebrated rather than relegated to the fringes.

Writing in 1984, Pope John Paul II decried the ‘artificial divisions between East and West Europe’ which served ‘political and military purposes’ and ignored the history of the people concerned. At the European Parliament in 1988, he urged the continent to come together while resisting uniformity and respecting the character of each country.<sup>64</sup>

Equally important is Pope Benedict XVI’s contribution to the nature of the European shared space and the cultural contribution of Christianity. In a keynote speech prior to his election as pope, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger noted that Christianity ‘did not start in Europe, and therefore it cannot even be classified as a European religion, the religion of the European cultural realm’. However, he argues that ‘it received precisely in Europe its most effective cultural and intellectual imprint and remains, therefore, identified in a special way with Europe’. He rejects the notion that acknowledging Europe’s Christian roots would be somehow exclusionary: ‘The affirmation that the mention of the Christian roots of Europe injures the sentiments of many non-Christians who are in Europe, is not very convincing, given that it relates, first of all, to an historical fact that no one can seriously deny’.<sup>65</sup>

Pope Francis wrote about Europe on the fiftieth anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the EU. He built his observations on the reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic, which led

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<sup>64</sup> A. P. DeBattista, ‘John Paul II and the European Ideal’, *Wszystko Co Najważniejsze*, 6 February 2021.

<sup>65</sup> J. Ratzinger, ‘On Europe’s Crisis of Culture’, speech delivered at the Monastery of St Scholastica, Subiaco, 1 April 2005.



to tensions over issues of solidarity and individual action. He urged Europe to rediscover its ‘most deeply-rooted ideals’:

Do not be afraid of your millenary history, which is a window open to the future more than the past. Do not be afraid of that thirst of yours for truth, which, from the days of ancient Greece, has spread throughout the world and brought to light the deepest questions of every human being. Do not be afraid of the thirst for justice that developed from Roman law and in time became respect for all human beings and their rights. Do not be afraid of your thirst for eternity, enriched by the encounter with the Judeo-Christian tradition reflected in your patrimony of faith, art and culture.

He expressed his hope that Europe may develop a ‘healthy secularism, where God and Caesar remain distinct but not opposed’.<sup>66</sup>

Regardless of where one stands in terms of personal faith, the contribution of Judeo-Christian inspiration to the historical, artistic, architectural, intellectual and political development of Europe deserves to be engaged with. This can only enrich our understanding and sense of shared identity in Europe.

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<sup>66</sup> Francis (Pope), ‘Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis on Europe’.

**Conclusion**



This study recognises that debates on culture and identity are often complex, sensitive and challenging to undertake. They are sometimes viewed as nebulous, though the frequent references in political discourse make them a vital subject for exploration by political scientists and policy practitioners. In the European political realm, particularly on the centre–right, such discussions will become more urgent and relevant.

There have been attempts by European institutions to articulate aspects of this shared space. Whether through symbols, political discourse or legislative instruments, there is a tacit recognition that Europeans have a common shared space that affects their personal and social identity. These debates have, in recent years, led to a growing but needless pitting of the ‘globalists’ against the ‘nationalists’. These simplistic divisions do not do justice to the complex nature of such debates.

Due to this divisive nature of some of the discourse, conservative, Christian Democratic and other parties on the centre–right have been somewhat reluctant to engage with such debates, thereby relegating this discussion to populist formations on the fringes.

Two observations are relevant to the debates analysed in this study. The first is that the significance that European citizens attach to identity changes over time. The second is that fostering a European identity is an ambitious project because the EU itself ‘proposes to build unity through diversity’, thus refuting the traditional construct of identity built largely on ‘the contrast between “us” and “them”’.<sup>67</sup>

This study demonstrates that it is vital to understand the nature of the European shared space and to appreciate the *sui generis* nature of the EU. Identifying the nature of both demonstrates that they are distinct but inform one another. It also reveals a serious flaw when trying to use the nation state and nationalism both as a yardstick to evaluate these two and as a template to shape their development.

European identity may be defined as having both a cultural element through its shared history, heritage and patrimony, and a civic element through the various representative institutions developed at the EU level. Nonetheless, identifying as European may not necessarily translate into direct support for the EU or European integration. Indeed, the latter is a complex issue that is best sustained through respect for strict subsidiarity rather than uniformity.

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<sup>67</sup> A. Martinelli, ‘The European Identity’, *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation* (2017), 6.



Subsidiarity remains central to securing diversity and allowing local, regional and national identities to coexist alongside a European identity.

All such identities remain in a state of flux—they are constantly developing and changing. Given this, it is understandable that the debate on identity may sometimes seem nebulous. Nonetheless, identity and culture are strongly related to the concept of meaning, which links the individual to the collective. They thus result in tangible political outcomes since the meaning one attaches to these issues often affects political choices and perceptions.

On a European level, these political outcomes are always best secured when individuals are allowed to explore such issues organically, through shared experiences and exchanges, rather than through the top-down imposition of symbols and narratives. When this occurs, the outcomes are richer and more nuanced, and therefore more reflective of what Europe is.



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Europe is a place where national identity can be affirmed, rather than rejected, since this does not contradict or weaken the idea of a shared European identity. This study discusses the multifaceted nature of European identity and culture. It argues that the EU should engage in, and not retreat from, such discussions.

The study posits that the shared European space and the sui generis nature of the EU mean that national identity and European identity should be considered complementary. Indeed, the two can strengthen each other. This, however, depends on the principle of subsidiarity being respected without qualification. In this regard, the EU has registered some success, but it has struggled when it has attempted to emulate nation-states in their creation of 'imagined communities'.



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