

ELEVEN

Comments

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On Some Errors in European Discourse

I want to get as close as possible to the topic of this session, so I will start by recalling its title: “European identity as the key to overcoming historical tensions”. It is straightforward to see that the topic includes three issues. The first is the presence of European identity – as some would even reject this possibility. The second is the nature of “historical tensions” between the European countries and nations that formed the European Union. The third issue is the role of European identity in coping with animosities, tensions, or even hostilities within Europe. All these issues are a problem.

Let me start with the concept and phenomenon of European identity. European identity can be understood either as the cultural unity of Europe or as a collective identity of Europeans. In its latter sense, it would assume the “we-experience” of Europeans, which sometimes may be understood as the individual experience of Europeans of an attachment to Europe. In the first meaning, European identity in the sense of cultural unity, according to professor Pomian, is a historical fact. So, based on historical analysis, we could easily say that we do have a European identity. In the text of professor Pomian, the concept of such an identity appears in a descriptive sense. When moving to the other sense that is to the idea of a collective identity of Europeans – which Krzysztof Pomian in the Post Scriptum to his earlier text puts in doubt – we should remember that no identity can be precisely collective. Someone must experience identity, and that is usually an individual. Of course, we can easily explain why we attribute it to many people and call it “collective”, but we should remember that such a concept is a theoretical construct. Looking at the experience of the European identity of individual Europeans, we may find that this experience is mostly beyond everyday awareness. On the other hand, we tend to assume that

this kind of experience is something we feel or even express. Since the attachment to Europe, as I see it, is, to a great extent, unconscious, it is easy to declare its absence.

In our thinking, we often merge all meanings of European identity, which I just briefly discussed. The problem is that we usually insist on the third meaning: the individual experience of attachment to Europe. When we consider this, especially when we look at surveys devoted to this topic, we usually are forced to deal with a false opposition. Such is the opposition that surveys impose on the respondents. The questions asked in the surveys tend to oppose European identity and national identity. Such opposition has nothing to do with empirical fact, but has been created by surveys; by the way, we ask people about their identity.

On the other hand, we can observe that living in the European Union people seem to take for granted most of the effects of European integration. We see something that can be called the “naturalization” of European integration. Most of the people, also those who oppose European integration, especially the younger generation, often take Europe without borders for granted, as something natural. Also, for example, the possibility of visiting other universities within the Erasmus program is to them the most normal practice. They do not realize that this is an effect of integration. Why, then, in most cases, when discussing European identity, do we so easily present it as contradictory to the national identity? Why do we accept this false opposition?

Let us look at how the Eurobarometer usually studies this issue. We get questions such as: “How attached you feel to your city, your country, Europe?” If this question is asked, it is natural that the respondent feels closest to her/his city, rather than to Europe. In another question, the Eurobarometer asks: “Do you see yourself as Polish, Polish and European, European and Polish or just European?” Such construction of the sentence is, again, imposing specific thinking and neglecting the fact that European identity belongs to the different order of personal experience of an individual than its national identity. This issue was researched a little bit better in the recent pan-European study by the European Council for Foreign Relations, as their question was: “Is being European to you as important as your own nationality?” In the ECFR study, we got a more positive answer regarding the issue of European identity because the majority of responses were: “agree”.

Let us move to the second issue in the topic of the current debate, that is “historical tensions”. There is no doubt that the past can leave very significant scars on the collective memories of different nations. On the other hand, political agencies can revitalize those scars or make them the background for new friendly relations between different nations responsible for the difficult past. Moreover, the problem of “tense relations” between some of the European Union member states is a matter of historical interpretations. Usually, history is subject to interpretation. Unfortunately, different interpretations are usually not detached from political calculations. We observe that specific actions and policies aimed at the formation of memory often impose interpretations that use history and historical memory for ideological purposes. So, the issue of historical tensions is not as clear as it may look like.

The third issue included in the topic of our current debate is a possible impact of European identity on historical tensions among European countries. Of course, we could say that if something is beyond our awareness, like European identity, it

cannot affect our beliefs. However, although European identity might be unconscious, the tensions between some European states and nations can be real and enhanced by national literature and established stereotypes. So, the reality of certain animosities seems to question the positive impact of the European identity, even if we agree on its presence. Gerard Delanty may be right noting that in our times even national cultures do not unite “increasingly diverse populations”, so also Europe “whether as a reference point for identities or as a unitary space – does not offer an alternative as a means of uniting people,” (2017: 8).

There are more arguments against the links between European identity and historical animosities among the European countries. In the 1991 study of perceptions of Europe in nine countries (Fells and Nižnik 1992), young people asked about the history of Europe said that the history of Europe was simply a history of wars. Also, in the text of professor Pomian, we read that the history of Europe is about permanent wars. On the other hand, maybe Hegel was right that periods of peace are the blank pages in the history books.

Professor Pomian suggests that the study of European history allows us to explain both European unity and European diversity. How, then, could we exploit this potential of history to expose Europe’s unity? The lecture by professor Pomian is probably the only text that so clearly formulates this question and points out the interpretation of history: “What of the European past is worth preserving?” This question deals precisely with what I have mentioned before: some actions – political or cultural – can shape the memory and interpret history. Let me then ask again: in what ways can we make European identity a uniting factor?

First of all, awareness of European identity needs certain conditions that should be created. Those conditions also depend on our choices regarding the history of Europe, which can be interpreted in favour of unity rather than disunity. It is a matter of policies of both the EU and the governments of member states. At the same time, the EU should attempt to protect and strengthen the uniqueness of the member states’ contributions to the common European heritage and make it more visible. We need deliberate actions and policy of the European Union that would stress not only the European identity but also the uniqueness of the member states, their nation’s heritage, where – as Gerard Delanty writes – “real substance of the European heritage... resides” (2017:8). In other words, we need the policy which will make useless specific arguments that are now formulated by Eurosceptics and xenophobic, exclusionist nationalists. In a sense, we need a more nationalized policy of European identity.

European integration from the beginning demonstrated this kind of attitude. For example, all member states’ languages are official languages of the European Union. However, this attitude did not become a planned, continued policy. The protection of the uniqueness and specificity of the member states’ contributions to the shared heritage and collective unity should be an active and visible policy of the European Union. It should also be supported by the interpretation of history and the formation of collective memory, which should not concentrate only on past conflicts. Also, we should eliminate in the public discourse the false opposition, the opposition of European versus national identity. While many seem to understand this, we still read texts with narratives that oppose these two.

We do have a chance to exploit the potential of history for exposing Europe's unity rather than its diversity, but we need to take this chance by skilfully referring to everything what is common in the identity of Europeans.

REFERENCES

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ANDRZEJ RYCHARD

European Identity Building: Some Remarks on Historical and Contemporary Tensions

Identity building is a long-term process. In the case of European identity building the problems and constraints result not only from history but also from contemporary challenges. There is a very complex mix of historical and present challenges, and this is very well understandable after reading Krzysztof Pomian's contribution. His piece shows the whole historical complexity of the interrelations between similarities and differences in Europe. It looks as if it had been written recently – however, the paper was written more than ten years ago! In my opinion it is a very convincing argument that history really does matter and that it is – in a sense – our contemporary problem, mixed with other more explicitly present-day challenges for European identity.

As new European tensions are emerging and old ones re-emerging, it can be sometimes heard that it is the “newly” admitted countries that are the main source of these tensions since they lack long-term democratic training. This is to some extent the peculiar trend in the post-communist transformation which after almost three decades of implementation of the liberal democratic model seems to be turning back, or at least questioning some institutional elements of the model. Such concepts as “hybrid regimes” are emerging to explain the current model. It should be noticed, however, that this would be a peculiar form of hybrid regime. Usually the term has been used to explain the institutional model of some post-soviet countries which have not yet achieved full democracy after abandoning the communist