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Identity problems of the citizens of the European Union

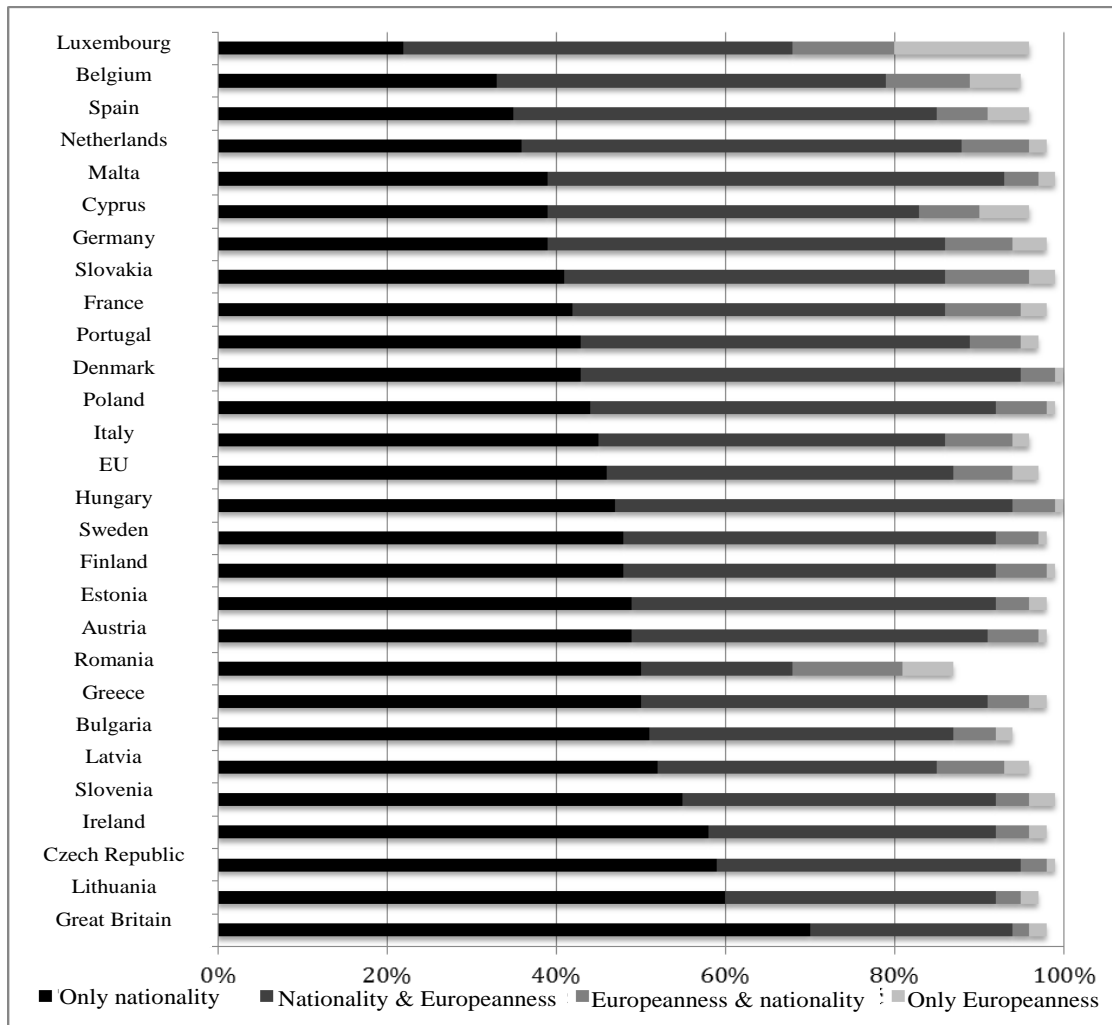
The discourse concerning the European identity has not brought us far and still remains very general. This is especially visible in the crucial difficulty – the inability to define Europeanness. The debate concerning the content of the notion has a long history of its own, the only clear conclusion of which is the obvious lack of possibility of reaching an agreement in this matter. Despite that, this is not a strictly academic problem, quite the opposite – especially during the time of European integration crisis – it is becoming a key political question about the future of Europe. Traditionally, system integration – creating institutions, regulations and structures – had priority over social integration – especially the development of common identity and the European public zone. The silent thesis of integration practices seemed to assume that the weaker, social side of integration would gradually follow the leader – the system. On the other hand, long before the current crisis, it was said that the excessive divergence of these two integration logics may result, among others, in a deficit of democracy and, therefore, also of the legitimization of the European project. During the crisis taking place now, the fear that the integration process will go too far and too deep to remain in any sense proportional to the weak or even weakening potential of the European community and social solidarity seems even more justified.

In the context of European integration the concept of “European identity” officially appears for the first time during the European summit in Copenhagen in 1973. It was then conceptualized in relation to the common internal interests, heritage and tradition of the group of the nine nations of that time, with regard to the “dynamic nature of European unification”. Because of this naturally dynamic nature of unification, within the next three decades the community of the member states significantly grew, not only in their numbers, but also when it comes to quality – through the introduction of far-reaching diversity in terms of political culture, tradition and customs. What is more, the very nature of integration changed to such a degree that the notion of “European identity” ceased to be important mainly for the governing bodies responsible for the ambitious intergovernmental regional project. On the contrary, the need to develop a common and relatively strong European identity became one of the most important challenges for the functioning of the European institutions. The particularly strong deficit of social legitimization and Pan-European solidarity became visible during the time of the current crisis, when political recipes saying “more Europe” are contradicted in many areas by social withdrawal from the “romance with Europe”.

The results of public opinion polls regarding this matter seem unsettling at the very first glance. The decrease in Europeanness of the EU citizens, visible in the research of the Eurobarometer, may serve as an example. The measurements of the Eurobarometer employ different questions probing the identity of Europeans. The most original are the following: “Do you see yourself in the nearest future as ...?”. Only one answer of the following can be chosen: (1) Only nationality (e.g. Polish), (2) Nationality and European, (3) European and nationality, (4) Only European, (5) Hard to say. The chart below shows the results from the spring edition of the Standard Eurobarometer from 2010. The answer “Hard to say” and lack of answer were disregarded in the chart for the sake of clarity.



Figure 1. Declared political identification preference in the nearest future in individual EU member states (2010)



Source: own compilation on the basis of EB.73 (spring 2010).

In almost all EU member states the level of declaration that in the future the individual citizens expect to possess only the European identity is close to zero. In that sense, it is clearly visible that the European identity is not a rival for national identity. On the other hand, interesting diversification arises in relation to the registered level of individual declarations of national identity only. In the majority of member states, several dozen percent of citizens predict their identification with nationality only. Even though the category of those who see themselves as representatives of both “nationality and Europeanness” is just slightly smaller, only a small percentage articulates this conjunction the other way round, emphasizing mainly their Europeanness. Of course, this does not mean that Europeanness is understood as an alternative to nationality – it is defined like this probably nowhere except



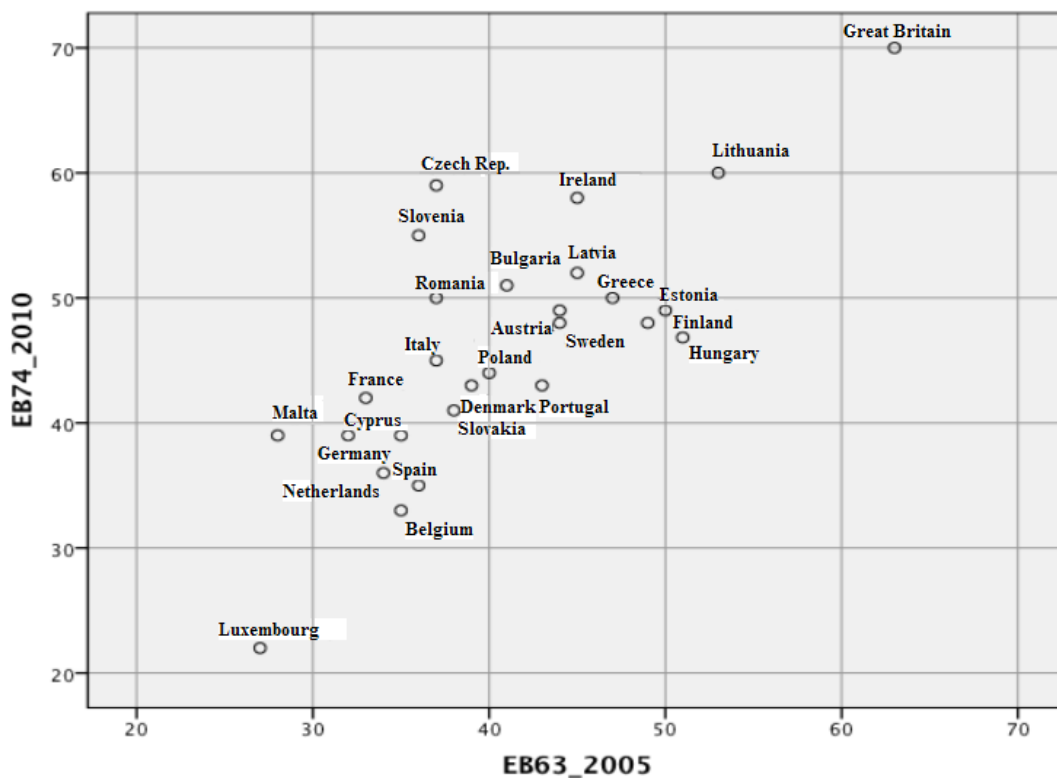
England, not even in the remaining parts of the United Kingdom. There is, however, not doubt that in a situation of actual choice it would be a much worse alternative for the majority of the European citizens.

From this point of view, it seems obvious that if the European identity were to be socially defined as antagonistic towards national identity, it would be in a hopeless situation in the social consciousness. That is why for years it has remained in line with the diagnosis of Anthony Smith who, in his classical article National identity and the idea of European unity, already two decades ago stated that “the contradiction between the European identity and the existing national identities may be more ostensible than real. It is to a large degree dependent on the version of national doctrine employed.” These results dispel any illusions about the utopian nature of the dreams of Europeanness as the primary dimension of EU citizens’ identity. Dreams such as for example those expressed in the statement of Ulrich Beck: “Today, we Europeans act as if Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and so forth, still existed. Yet they have long since ceased to exist, (...) these isolated nation-state containers of power and the equally isolated, mutually excluding societies they represented entered the realm of the unreal. To the extent that Europe exists, there is no longer any such thing as Germany, or France, or Italy, or Britain, and so on, as these exist in people’s heads and in the picture-book accounts of the historians.” In defiance of system circumstances, national identities are doing fine despite, and sometimes maybe even because of the nation independence crisis. As it was succinctly stated in a technocratic report containing the results of the Standard Eurobarometer from 2010 (EB.73): “nationality remains the main determinant for Europeans.”

The results achieved in 2010 are significantly worse, from the point of view of Europeanization, in comparison to those from 2005 – even though it is not a collapse, a large step backwards is clearly visible.



Figure 2. Reference of the predicted nearest future political declaration results in EU members states in 2006 and 2010



Source: own compilation on the basis of EB.73 (spring 2010) and EB.64 (fall 2005).

The comparison of the results achieved during the current crisis with those from five years ago shows that, despite the general stability of attitudes within member states, an increase in the declaration of “nationality only” is visible in the majority of societies. The average increase for the whole EU was 4 pp and was accompanied by a 3 pp decrease in the number of declarations of “national and European” identities. The levels of the other possible answers remained stably marginal. On the other hand, even if it is possible to point to individual countries, such as the Czech Republic, where a particularly significant increase for “nationality only” identification was noted, the increase in the majority of member states was generally even. In other words, it is difficult to find differences between various types of countries distinguished on the basis of their role in the current European public finance crisis. We are more likely dealing with a step backwards towards national positions in whole Europe. This phenomenon is motivated not so much at the level of the European public sphere, but the problems formulated in different ways by national public spheres.

In a certain contrast to the described change in social attitudes are the results of the Special Eurobarometer „Future of Europe” (EB.76.4), which was conducted in December



2011. A significant raise in the selection of the answer “national and European identification” was reported then, because of which it again became slightly more popular than “nationality only”. This change of places resulted from a 5 pp increase in the selection of “nationality and Europeaness” and a simultaneous 7 pp decrease in the selection of “nationality only”, so the support was 46% for the first option and 39% for the second one. It seems legitimate, however, to treat this sudden, unexpected return to the position from before the current crisis with certain skepticism. However, it is still difficult to compare the results from the questionnaire from the Standard Barometer from those included in the Special Barometer, devoted specifically to the problem of the future of Europe. A sequence of questions focused on the problems and challenges standing before European integration put the respondents in a completely different situation than when the question about nationality or Europeaness is accompanied by completely different questions. This is why this result has to be treated as exceptional, rather than reproducible and to verify the results from EB.74 we need to wait for the next issue of the Standard Eurobarometer, in which this question will be posed.

It is, of course, difficult to draw far-reaching conclusions on the basis of such weak premises as poll results concerning just one question taken out of context. Despite that, it is hard to disregard the fact that the described regularity is not isolated. On the contrary, in the current political life and public discourse of many member states one can notice multiple indications of aversion towards Europeanization. The increase in political radicalism is visible both in the countries of the indebted South, such as Greece, which is surrounded by the expansion of radical right and left wings, as well as the wealthy North – the relative success of extreme right wing in Finland. On the other hand, the conservative party ruling in the Great Britain openly flirts with idea of holding a referendum concerning the membership in the European Union. Even in Germany, currently being the main economic safe haven of European integration, certain resistance towards deeper integration is arising in light of the democratic legitimization deficit of the decisions made at the European level. What follows is that nobody can be sure that the reaction to the crisis, sanctioned by historical experience, in the form of pushing European integration to a higher level, will not cause the European institutions to become irreversibly separated from the sources of identity contained in the public sphere and common identity.

In this sense, the crop of new ideas to overcome the crisis, stipulating a run forward by means of deepening integration, concentrates on developing system integration much above the level which could potentially be reached by social integration. The idea recently proposed by the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, of creating a “federation of nation states”, the propositions of the Reflection Group on the Future of Europe, also heading towards the federal direction, or the significant deepening of



integration in the eurozone promoted by the European Central Bank and Claude Juncker, the head of the Eurogroup – all these visions lead to a place in which the European institutions will rule without the demos, in a certain permanent democratic deficit. Maybe this is how it is supposed to be. Maybe, for the common good, integration does not have to wait for the demos, but the allegedly central values of the European Union would then have to be publicly and critically discussed. Otherwise, on the one hand, the risk of the failure of the whole project will rise because of civic resistance in individual member states, on the other, the potential success may result in a sudden emergence of a European empire, the shape and functioning of which will be excluded from any effective democratic control.

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