

A POSITIVE EUROPEAN IDENTITY

Karel B. Müller

IF NATION STATES WISH TO SUCCESSFULLY PURSUE THEIR NATIONAL INTERESTS, THEY MUST BE WILLING TO SACRIFICE THEIR AUTONOMY.

The crisis of the national state is primarily a result of our way of life, most commonly described as globalisation, which has brought with it numerous social, ecological and security risks. The main definition of the nation state is based on territorial borders and the current crisis of the nation state is primarily a crisis of these territorial principles. When considering whether or not we need to further cultivate our European identity in order to deepen the process of integration, we must ask ourselves a key question: is further integration even desirable? Twenty years ago, Daniel Bell (American sociologist, b.1919 – Ed.) stated that most nation states were already too big to adequately address and resolve local issues, yet too small to address and solve global problems. The Chernobyl disaster in 1986 and the ever-increasing levels of terrorist activity around the world are the first unmistakable signs of this.

Regions to the Rescue

Max Weber (German political economist and sociologist, 1864-1920 – Ed.) once defined the modern state as an institution, which maintains a monopoly over a certain territory by force. Today, governments are no longer able to maintain that absolute control. No state can fully ensure the security of its citizens purely through its own internal resources. This leads to a paradoxical situation – if nation states wish to pursue their national interests successfully, they must be will-

ing to sacrifice their autonomy. Thus, the effectiveness of state institutions is concomitant with a growth in dependence and co-operation between other states and global institutions.

The principal challenge for Europe today is to maintain existing levels of prosperity, political freedom, and social integrity. Arguably, the preservation of the nation state can only be secured when certain authority is transferred from the nation state to political entities able to manage the trans-national nature of many of today's global problems. With regard to integration, we often talk only of political centralisation, to the detriment of another crucial component – subsidiarity, which in fact emphasises decentralisation. (According to the principles of subsidiarity, each activity of the state and society should merely be supportive or subsidiary and specific matters should be handled by the smallest (or, the lowest) competent authority. –Ed.)

Globalisation is demanding political integration in certain areas. Democratisation, which proponents argue is a key component of globalisation, also exerts pressure on political decentralisation in other arenas. Many matters that are traditionally the responsibility of the state might be far better resolved on a local and communal level. Thus, the Europe of the future could be perceived as a decentralised system with many levels of political decision-making. Some political analysts talk of a European condominium. The

growing importance of regional identities is being continuously demonstrated, often to the extent that they are considered stronger than national identities.

Bottom's Up

Because of the expansion of the EU and the increasing urgency of the continent's many problems, it is inevitable that majority decision making (rather than nation-by-nation consensus) will become more prevalent. Indeed, the recently rejected European constitution had this issue at its very core. The stability and further democratic development of the Union depends on a social foundation that will serve to legitimise this form of governance. If Europeans are to cope with the effects of globalisation, they must first develop a European civic society.

Many suggest that the main obstacle to further integration is primarily a limited sense of pan-Europeanism amongst its inhabitants. In addition to this, there exists the need to develop a kind of EU politics that will function with the wide-ranging consensus of its inhabitants. But if such mechanisms are not accompanied by an increasing awareness of European affiliation, Europe's sense of solidarity may actually weaken.

We also often hear the objection that further integration is not possible because of a lack of development in the European public sphere. From an empirical viewpoint, this can be viewed as mere historical determinism (the belief that

every event, is determined by an unbroken chain of prior occurrences -Ed.) The formation of the United States, as well as the internal histories of many of today's European states directly contradict this view. At the time of the acceptance of the American constitution, a fully-formed US society did not yet exist. A similar situation was evident during the creation of Italy and Germany from their previously independent sub-states.

If European awareness is to develop from the ground upwards, Europe must firstly be soundly constructed at the top.

Political institutions cannot guarantee the development of the European public sphere by themselves, but they can make a valid contribution to its progress. This might entail supporting the creation of new European public spaces, fomenting multiculturalism and communication, or contributing to the study of a common view of European history.

Critics that frequently point to the dysfunction of the EUs numerous pan-European structures often fail to consider the importance of civic participation in the formation of a collective

identity. As many social scientists have shown, democratic citizenship can also ensure an abstract and mediated solidarity between foreigners. For this reason, it is widely believed that the formation of a European identity can be helped by the acceptance of a constitution. However, the recent failure to get a version of this constitution passed, only underlines the fact that European identity must be viewed primarily as an awareness of political solidarity, rather than allegiance to a cultural or political entity, even though both are closely intertwined.

Communication and Identity

If we come to believe that the peaceful settling of conflicts cannot serve as a foundation for solidarity and collective identity, European integration will certainly hit a brick wall. However, if we learn to assume that European civilisation is united by its diversity – the kind that once led to conflict – then consensus will have to be placed at the forefront of the political process. Co-operation is not simply about levelling out differences and putting conflicts aside, but rather putting them in an institutional framework. If our diversity unites us, then so do our conflicting natures. In a peaceful, fair and open institutionalisation of our conflicts, we may find the key to our integration potential and the source of European cohesion.

From the example of European history, we see that national identities have usually flourished either through domination or conflict with neighbouring cultures. The recent genocide in the Balkans is proof that even today's Europe is not immune to such excesses. The process of constructing a European identity can thus be viewed as an overcoming of the negative traits of national identity. The European Union as well as European civic society in general, must attempt to create an environment in which individuals are able to cope with the negative side-effects associated with this constructive process. ■

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