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**Rethinking Unity in Diversity: the potential of European Identity in rapidly diversifying societies**

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## **Abstract**

Europe seems deeply divided due to recent crises such as the EURO crisis and the Brexit. Moreover, the EU seems unable to entice its citizens and the construction of a shared European identity seems more distant than ever. Yet, in this paper I argue that this is testimony to a specific and limited view on European identity construction and focuses solely on the experiences of so-called 'native Europeans'. There are clear indications that a sense of Europeanness is emerging among ethnic minority groups across Europe and that they are becoming key actors in European identity formation. Yet, they are currently rarely acknowledged as such. From a predominantly sociological perspective on identity theory I aim to argue that these processes can be understood as strategies by groups that feel excluded from national identities but do (want to) feel at home in 'Europe'. To this end I build my argument upon three main tendencies in European societies: the unsuccessful marriage between the EU and European identity, the return of the national and the rapid transformation of European cities (and beyond) into localities wherein 'native Europeans' become a minority next to other minorities and new collective identities might emerge. The paper ends with a further discussion of the opportunities and pitfalls European identity formation might be confronted with in the near future.

## **Keywords**

European identity – National identity – Ethnic diversity – Majority-Minority relations

## **Introduction**

The notion of ‘European identity’ has puzzled scholars and politicians for many decades (and even ages, Drace-Francis, 2013; Pasture, 2015). It is said to be an elusive identity, and highly ambiguous, leading to only few ‘Europeans’ to strongly identify as European. However, ‘Europe’ does stir public debates, albeit often through issues concerning the European Union project rather than issues concerning European identity. Yet, in recent years, the notions of European identity, values and heritage have been put on the public and political agenda, primarily due to the refugee policy crisis starting from 2015 onwards. This even inspired the new president of the European Commission to stress, in her mission letter of 2019, the need to protect (although in later stages reference is also made to ‘the need to promote’ rather than ‘protect’) ‘our European way of life’ (Von der Leyen, 2019). Next to this, the high inflow of mainly Muslim refugees (and migrants) has given a new impetus to nationalist movements that are – to some extent ironically – connecting in supranational European (or even ‘Western’) wide alliances. These various processes can have a deep impact on how a shared European identity further develops in the near future. Indeed, as any identity it can be used to include a wide variety of ‘others’ while at the same time excluding different ‘others’. This is the core topic of the current paper: European identity (‘a European way of life’) is used by various political and social actors to construct a clear boundary, in particular in relation to Muslims and/or (sub-Saharan) migrants. Yet, at the same time recent work is showing that these latter groups are also using European identity to legitimize their presence in Europe (Clycq, 2017; Agirdag, *et al.*, 2016; Teney, *et al.*, 2016). This makes identity formation processes central to understanding these phenomena.

Building on the work of Jenkins (2008a), I aim to argue that sociological and anthropological approaches to the study of European identity can offer insights currently only

marginally part of 'European studies' despite interesting efforts by scholars such as Delanty (2013), Giddens (2014), Roche (2010) and Jenkins (2008b). Before embarking upon this theoretical venture, a few limitations and/or specific focal points need to be stressed. First, when discussing Europe one easily slips into a discussion on the European Union – as the first paragraph of this paper to some extent shows – while it is still possible to discuss Europe and European identity formation without necessarily explicitly discussing the EU at the same time. In particular since research shows that the impact of the EU on European identity formation is (very) modest (Roose, 2013), and that even in Antiquity authors such as Herodotus and Hippocrates have discussed the 'imagination of Europe' (Drace-Francis, 2013). Thus, in this paper I aim to discuss European identity formation via this broader theoretical and empirical framework of which the EU may be part, but does not provide the dominant framework. A second limitation of this paper concerns the concept of 'European identity'. Following Jenkins (2008b), I view this supranational identity as a, at least in common parlour and perception, particularly ambiguous identity. Even though to a large extent all identities are ambiguous, the supranational 'nature' of European identity seems to add to its elusiveness. This will be discussed more elaborately below. A third specificity concerns the focus of this paper which looks at European identity formation from the perspective of ethnic minorities in Europe. Crucial for my argument is the continuing ethno-cultural diversification of European cities to argue that European identity can be or, more accurately stated, is being re-imagined 'from below'. My main analysis will be primarily based upon existing research studying individuals with an immigration background born in Europe (with a few short references to current ongoing personal research) even though this concerns a relatively new research domain (Clycq, 2017; Crul, 2016). My main argument is that the tendency of the second and third generation youngsters with an immigrant background to identify more as European than as national is pivotal, particularly given that they are born on 'national soil' and participate(d) on a daily basis

in national institutions, such as the educational system (Agirdag, *et al.*, 2016; Clycq, 2017; Clycq and Levrau, 2017; Teney, *et al.*, 2016). Thus, rather than studying the way ethno-cultural diversity and migration impact on ‘native Europeans’<sup>1</sup> identity constructions (Kaina, *et al.*, 2016) – e.g. does the percentage of migrants in a country have a positive or negative impact on European identity formation of the national/native majority group? – I aim to argue that ethnic minorities themselves may become key actors in European identity formation. To strengthen my argument, I will refer to identity theory claiming identities are always constructed based upon certain interests. For example, European identity could become a collective identity able to include the existing diversity, something national identities in Europe often fail to do (Alba and Foner, 2015). A last point to be discussed is the centrality of the urban context in these processes. Most research on identity formation of ethnic minority and majority groups is executed in cities given the high ethnic diversity present therein. These cities could indeed be outlier-contexts and they might fundamentally differ from more rural and less diverse areas. This is a question the current paper is unable to answer. However, recent studies are showing how ‘diversity is spreading’ across European countries and as Catney (2016) eloquently describes, in countries such as England and Wales the geographies of ethnic diversity are changing and rural areas are becoming rapidly more diverse. This is due to some extent to the upward social mobility of former migrants and their families that move out of city centres, and of the location of reception centres for asylum seekers outside of urban areas (Rye and Andrzejewska, 2010; Whyte, *et al.*, 2019). Interestingly this also led to new conceptualizations such as ‘rural cosmopolitanism’ illustrating that even in previously quite ethnically homogeneous areas new ways of living together might develop (Krivokapic-Skoko, *et al.*,

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, native Europeans can be defined as Europeans inhabitants without an immigration background: individuals that themselves – or whose (grand)parents – have not migrated to the (European) country they are living in

2018). Thus, the argument can be made that certain phenomena, that emerge up until now mainly in urban areas, will also emerge in non-urban areas in the near future.

Thus the current paper aims to advance the current state of the art by bringing innovative perspectives into the discussion of European identity. I start with an elaboration of the concept of identity, and European identity in particular. Then I move on to clarify the importance of three transformations current European societies are facing: (1) the (increasingly) strained relation between the EU and European identity, (2) the return of nationalism, and (3) the increasing ethno-cultural diversification of European societies in relation to rather exclusive national identities. In a next step I aim to bring these issues together in a broader discussion of the re-imagination of European identity. In a final section a new perspective is introduced – looking at European identity formation from the perspective of ‘ethnic minorities’ – and I elaborate on recent findings that show that European identity is becoming an increasingly important part of life in diverse societies.

### **Conceptualizing ‘Europe’ and European identity**

Although in common parlour European identity is often described as elusive and ambiguous, and therefore not attractive to most ‘Europeans’, this is not different than other collective identities (Jenkins, 2008b). Even (sub)national identities and ethnic identities are to a large extent elusive as a clear definition of what it is to be a (sub)national citizen often does not exist. They are described as imagined communities, clearly arousing high emotions and feelings of loyalty, but nonetheless they remain primarily imagined (Anderson, 1991). A major difference with European identity might be that (sub)national identities still often harbour notions of primordiality. While it is generally accepted in the academic field that collective identities are to a large extent socially constructed – in the sense that through interaction individuals among

themselves, but also in interaction with the socio-cultural and structural environment, constantly make and remake identities – certain identities also have a ‘primordial rooting’ (Jenkins, 2014). This notion of primordiality – the cognition and feeling that one is born with a specific identity is difficult and for many impossible to change – is often part of the representations of (sub)national identities, in particular in Western-Europe (Alba & Foner, 2015). While this partly explains the continuing strong attachment of native Europeans with their (sub)national identity, this might also explain the much lower attachment of ‘ethnic minorities’ to these (sub)national identities as they generally do not feel primordially attached to these identities in the same ‘thick’ fashion as native Europeans do (Clycq, 2016).

A second major difference between (sub)national and European identity is that there is a general perception that (sub)national identities are commonly imagined around specific, more or less delineated events or territories connected to a collective history and continuing into a shared future (Anderson, 1991). While socially constructed, these imaginations are often perceived as real and genuine, notwithstanding discussions on contestations of these representations are equally real (Brubaker, 2015). Yet, at the same time it is quite common to discuss European identity in a more open fashion, and to argue that there are ‘by definition’ various possible models or imaginations of Europe and European identity referring to notions such as European culture, values, territory and politics (see e.g. Delanty 2002; Jenkins, 2008b). From a sociological perspective on identity formation, the importance of ‘the other’ or even ‘the outsider’ refers to the basic tenet that one’s identity is always constructed vis à vis others (Turner and Reynolds, 2001). To a large extent one’s identity is also an ascribed identity, how American, Asians, Africans and so forth think of Europe is important to how Europeans imagine Europe (Jenkins, 2008b). However, one can also argue that this so-called other can also be found within European societies. Since long (former) migrant groups, ethnic minorities and in particular Muslims are represented as rather ‘alien’ to European society – in particular after



specific terrorist attacks or after the refugee policy crisis (Clycq & Levrau, 2018). With respect to European identity formation their presence in Europe is still often seen as ‘probationary’ and their role in the making of European identity is all too often discussed as one of ‘impacting’ on native Europeans’ lives (Kaina, *et al.*, 2016). Thus these ‘others’ are more often than not represented as passive agents.

This is a gap I aim to address in this paper by studying ethnic minorities as active actors in European identity formation and in this way arguing that they are no outsiders to these processes but fundamentally take part in them and can have important impact on European identity’s further emergence and importance in everyday life. Moreover, this section aimed to argue that ambiguity is part of most (or all?) collective identities but that the general perception that European identity is elusive as its content is not ‘fixed’ can be a strength in highly diversifying societies rather than a weakness. This brings us to the discussion of three important characteristics in current societies that provide the background of a deeper reflection on the issues raised above.

### **Three key societal trends and transformations**

In this paper I aim to argue that in particular the following three main societal transformations might be relevant drivers for a further development of European identity in coming years.

#### *The unsuccessful marriage between European identity and the European Union*

I start with discussing the weak relationship between European identity and the European Union. Even though the notion of ‘Europe’ appeared in writing ages ago (Drace-Francis, 2013; Pasture, 2015), in recent decades the European Union (and its predecessors) seems to have

overtaken the meaning of what Europe is or can be (Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2015). The EU – which still considers European identity unfinished business (Schunz, 2012) – tried to tap into these existing imaginations of Europe. First by providing a political and economic framework to further the development of notions of European belonging and identification with the aim to foster cohesion between ‘European nations’, hence their ‘United in diversity’ motto (Giddens, 2014). Thus, it is no surprise that when discussing European identity, the reference to the EU is always brought into the mix. Yet, the content of this relationship still remains unclear.

Research on European identity generally shows that the socio-economically more affluent individuals and those engaged in cross-national activities often identify most strongly with ‘Europe’ but also with the EU, the main argument being that they benefit most from EU policy (Fligstein, 2008; Recchi, 2014). The majority of ‘Europeans’, on the other hand, identifies to a greater extent with their national, regional and/or local identity than with ‘Europe’ (Reeskens and Wright, 2014). Mainly due to these findings European identity is often interpreted as an instrumental and elite-driven identity, with apparently little meaning to and relevance as an identity category in the lives of many ‘ordinary’ Europeans (Eder, 2014).

Moreover, various studies have shown that in the past decades there has not been a strong upsurge in ‘feeling European’ despite the many efforts of the EU (Roose, 2013). Only modestly positive or even no effects on European identification have been found of residing in a EU member state and/or the Schengen zone, the everyday use of the EURO, or even student exchange programmes such as Erasmus (Erisen, 2017; Mitchell, 2015; Pöttschke, *et al.*, 2014; Sigalas, 2010). One conclusion is that this decades-long primarily top-down strategy of the EU and other policy makers to strengthen European identity does not coincide with much higher percentages of European identification among EU citizens (Bergbauer, 2018).

Moreover, and this is an important element in the current argument, in the past decade even the abovementioned higher-educated and more affluent groups increasingly seem to harbour more negative feelings towards the EU, potentially due to a more belated negative impact of the economic crisis on their societal position (Teney, 2016). It is unclear if and how it affects their identification with the EU and with 'Europe', but it might be an indication that a primarily instrumental-extrinsic identification with Europe has much more difficulty to withstand crisis situations than a more intrinsic and deep-rooted emotional identification (Eder, 2014). Some therefore argue that the impact of the EU in developing such a deep-rooted identity that enables feelings of solidarity across national boundaries is weak (Kennedy, 2013). This encourages us to think about European identity formation from a broader perspective and possibly even to see it independent of – or much less dependent on – the political and economic European Union, despite the latter's cannibalizing discourse with respect to European identity. Indeed, Bergbauer (2018) argues that while attachment to the European Union remains rather limited, the attachment to 'Europe' is stronger and more solid. This might indeed be a more fruitful source for European identity formation.

### *The return of the national*

A second important social trend next to – or in some contexts specifically related to – the tenuous relation between the EU and European identity, is the 'return of the national' (Triandafyllidou, 2017). In the past decade scholars have argued that nationalism is rising in Europe and key politicians such as Merkel, Sarkozy and Cameron have played an important role by arguing that multiculturalism has failed and that the reaffirmation of national identities might help alleviate social tensions in highly diverse societies (Clycq & Levrau, 2018). As Triandafyllidou (2017) states, despite continuing globalization and the emergence of

phenomena and crises that clearly supersede the boundaries and competences of the nation state, for some groups in society the return to the imagination of an ethno-cultural homogenous nation seems to deliver a much needed feeling of security and comfort. While research clearly shows that national identities not necessarily clash with supranational identities – to identify as European is often argued to be dependent on identifying as a national citizen (Reeskens and Wright, 2014) – recent crises could be showing a rising tension between national and supranational identities. This could imply a tension between a rather homogeneous and exclusive ethnic and/or cultural imagination of national identity which conflicts with a more inclusive and heterogeneous European identity, or it could also imply that ethno-cultural nationalists are applying a homogenous cultural or religious ‘Europe’ to differentiate themselves from ethnic, religious and/or cultural ‘others’. In doing so a return of nationalism could also strengthen a specific notion of Europeanness, something that was already observed in research (Van Nieuwenhuysse and Wils, 2015).

Moreover, and linking up with the discussion on the role of the higher-educated, affluent groups in society, the return of nationalism is not only a story of the so-called ‘economically left behind’ ethnically native Europeans. Studying the breakdown of the Brexit vote clearly illustrates this. As Bhambra (2017), Antonucci *et al.* (2017) and others argue, the mantra of the ‘impoverished left behind’ not relating to the European elite needs to be nuanced as a large portion of the ‘leave voters’ had a middle class background and one of the main issues encouraging the leave vote was immigration and the idea of ‘white British/English taking our country back’ (Triandafyllidou, 2017). This is an important societal tendency: in a time when major European societies and cities in particular are diversifying rapidly, some ‘native Europeans’ are turning towards (ethno-cultural) nationalist rethorics and politics. This brings us to the next transformation I build my argument upon.

### *The unsuccessful marriage between (sub)national identities and ethnic minorities in Europe*

The abovementioned findings – the at best modest impact of the EU on European identification processes and the return of nationalism – need to be related to a third process fundamentally transforming European societies. In particular metropolitan areas such as Antwerp, Paris, Rotterdam and London are considered majority-minority cities in the sense that minorities are (becoming) the majority (Kasinitz, *et al.*, 2002). However, this definition is misleading considering that it treats minorities as a rather homogenous group that becomes ‘the majority’, while in reality the process that is occurring is that every ‘ethnic group’ becomes or is a minority group. Sooner rather than later ‘native Europeans’ will become an ethnic minority next to other ethnic minorities (Mollenkopf and Crul, 2012). While this transformation up until recently primarily has been a feature of urban contexts, it is becoming clear that ethnic diversification is no longer confined to cities. As argued above, rural areas are rapidly becoming more diverse in ethnic, cultural and religious terms (Catney, 2016; Rye and Andrzejewska, 2010; Whyte, *et al.*, 2019). If and when similar identity formation processes emerge in more rural areas, is the topic of future research, although there are indications that new forms of ‘rural cosmopolitanism’ – conceptually related to the idea of ‘supranational identities’ – are being constructed by local actors (Krivokapic-Skoko, *et al.*, 2018).

What is clear is that the effects of the rapid ethno-cultural diversifications are multifold, in particular on the social and political institutions such as education and the labour market (Schleicher, 2018). One recurrent finding is that individuals with an immigration background in general face more obstacles and inequalities in most European countries (with notable exceptions in countries such as the UK). However, I would like to relate this transformation to processes of (collective) identity formation, which I also consider to be one of the main issues

troubling rapidly diversifying European societies. One recurrent finding is indeed that the (sub)national identities of many European countries are quite exclusively defined and ethnic minorities in general do not strongly identify with these (sub)national identities (Clycq, 2016; Fleischmann and Phalet, 2016, 2018; Alba and Foner, 2015). As 'native' Europeans generally identify quite strongly with the (sub)national identity it shows important differences and tensions with minority groups who generally do not identify as such, potentially revealing an important gap with respect to a unifying collective identity.

While research often stressed the importance of cities in bringing individuals from diverse socio-demographic backgrounds together through concrete everyday interactions (Paddison and McCann, 2014; Ridgley, 2008), as is clear by now, in this paper I believe it is relevant to also pursue another line of thought and discuss how a supranational identity might become increasingly important in diversifying societies.

### **Rethinking and reimagining European identity**

#### *The elusiveness of 'Europe' as a misrecognized asset*

As argued before, in this paper European identity is to a large extent stripped from its EU connotation and treated as a more generic identity category. To do this, one can take advantage of the existing conceptual fluidity and elusiveness of European identity (Jenkins, 2008b). A new perspective I pursue here, is the imagination of Europe by 'the outsider within' Europe, the perspectives of those who are seldom viewed as 'legitimate' actors in European identity formation (Gould and Messina, 2014; Wodak and Boukala, 2015). I come back to this.

Given its elusiveness, European identity can easily exist next to national and other identities as captured by the nested, multiple or polyphonic identity theory arguing individuals

combine various identities into their personal identity (Boehnke and Fuss, 2008; Medrano and Gutiérrez, 2001; Recchi, 2014). Yet, this could also imply that while European identification generally seems to be accompanied with inclusive value orientations (Boehnke and Fuss, 2008), its elusiveness also leaves room to be imagined in rather exclusive ethnic, cultural and/or religious terms (Clycq, 2015, 2016). To understand the mechanisms of European identity formation it is interesting to discuss some empirical findings disentangling this complexity.

Some argue the weak relation between the EU and European identity indicate that most of the factors related to European identity formation operate on the individual level and are not necessarily dependent upon (knowledge about) the EU (Verhaegen and Hooghe, 2015). Thus studies focus for example on the cognitive mobilization and cross-border activities of individuals. Again here only modest positive impact can be found. Having extensive knowledge about Europe does not necessarily lead to a significantly higher European identification (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2015; Verhaegen and Hooghe, 2015). Moreover, also cross-border or transnational activities, which are predominantly a higher SES phenomenon, do not seem to foster significantly more identification with 'Europe' (Pötzschke, *et al.* 2014). The causal relations are hard to pin down, but up until now research predominantly showed that those individuals, e.g., participating in cross-border activities or travels already have a higher identification with Europe (Kuhn, 2012; Recchi, 2014). One's disposition towards 'Europe' does not seem to change significantly after acquiring more knowledge about Europe and/or the EU, nor after having more cross-national interactions with other Europeans. Thus something seems missing and notably absent is the emotional dimension of identity formation, next to the cognitive and behavioural dimensions (Jenkins, 2014). In general Europeans do not seem to have a strong emotional connection to 'Europe' (Roose, 2013). This might well be the main difference with national identities: the latter's emotional salience and power to mobilize (groups of) individuals can be very profound, up to the point that national citizens want to give their life

for their 'imagined national community' (Anderson, 1991). While the current inflow of (mainly Muslim) refugees and migrants seems to have touched upon these 'deep' emotions triggering, as mentioned, policy initiatives to 'protect/promote the European way of life' (Von der Leyen, 2019), it seems to have led primarily to a return of the national rather than to a stronger European identity, with the Brexit as a clear example. Thus, despite many efforts by the EU and its representatives and/or adepts, creating a broadly shared and deep emotional attraction of individuals to the EU via European identity remains difficult.

One could conclude that the future of European identity is quite bleak. Why would European identity become an important identity in everyday life when it remained after all these centuries and certainly after the many efforts of the EU (and its predecessors) to stimulate European identification, only of minor importance to Europeans? The traditional 'fanbase' of European identity, the higher educated mobile elites, seems to turn away and the EU itself does not seem to be able stimulate a stronger identification among the broader European demos. Who then might be interested in this European identity?

Some argue that a solution is to focus on the construction of a national identity-like European identity given the common culture and history of European nations and that national identities are the only viable stepping stone towards European identity (Duchesne and Frogner, 2008), while others explicitly posit the opposite arguing it is logical that a European identity cannot (and will not) emerge out of these different national identities (Twist, 2006). Thus given Europe's troubled past and its strained present some argue that it is highly unlikely that a European identity will miraculously emerge in the (near) future (Hooghe and Verhaeghe, 2015). However, I argue this is testimony to a specific and limited view on European identity construction and focuses solely on the experiences of so-called native national majority groups.



### *New actors in European identity formation*

Only very few studies on European identity are taking account of the fundamental transformations occurring in local contexts, and in cities in particular, across Europe (Kohli, 2000; Teney, *et al.*, 2016). As I argued before, a situation is unfolding wherein native majority groups are becoming a minority next to other minorities and this transformation into ‘majority-minority’ cities is an interesting starting point to think about European identity (Mollenkopf and Crul, 2012). There seems to be a relatively large group of mainly second and third generation individuals that in general do not feel part of the national imaginary of the country they are living in, but that to a higher extent identify as European. Moreover, it seems to be one of the very few identities able to unify ethnic minorities and (former) native majorities (Agirdag, *et al.* 2016; Clycq, 2017). However, research has only fragmentarily engaged with these phenomena in large-scale macro-level quantitative research (Erisen, 2017; Teney, 2016), in education research (Agirdag, *et al.* 2016), in family socialization processes (Clycq, 2015), in cross-border activities (Pötzschke, *et al.*, 2014), or in small-scale qualitative research (Cinnirella and Hamilton, 2007; Slavtcheva-Petkova, *et al.*, 2013).

Moreover, up until now it remained relatively unclear what underlying meanings are attached to this European identification. Is it based on a notion of shared values, human rights, religion, culture and/or a cosmopolitan outlook? Or is it rather a creative strategy for marginalized and subordinated individuals feeling excluded from national identities and longing for a collective identity to acquire a higher societal, moral status and/or sense of belonging (Jenkins, 2008a; Lamont, 2014)? In this way it might again be a more – albeit immaterial – instrumental identification in a recognition process of wanting to be perceived as ‘genuine’ and ‘legitimate’ (European) citizens (Brubaker, 2015; Lamont, 2014). Indeed, some

research shows inclusive policies do seem to have an influence on European identity formation, as Faas (2016) showed with respect to Turkish minority students in the Germany. Inclusiveness – broadly speaking – seems to be related to European identity, which does correspond with the ‘united in diversity’ motto of the EU. However the salience (and usefulness) of this ‘inclusiveness’ might primarily emerge in contexts where a strong exclusion of ethnic minorities might be present and where ethnic minorities see an opportunity to use European identity to feel at home in the country they are living in.

These findings also point to the relevance of focusing on the notion of ‘European identity’ in diverse contexts precisely given its ambiguity and elusiveness, rather than taking this ambiguity as a reason to discard the concept. European identity is a notion ‘out there’, it is cognitively available and present in public and political discourses, but internalized and appropriated by few. Therefore it offers the opportunity for politization by a variety of stakeholders: it could prove to be an identity worth having for specific groups in society (Skeggs, 2010). Moreover, given that ownership of this identity is disputed and even contested ‘from within’ by European citizens this might make it more difficult for these European citizens to exclude ‘the other’ from appropriating this identity, and could shift power relations (Wimmer, 2013). Thus I argue that we are offered a rare opportunity to study how specific groups might claim an identity that they could use to change and strengthen their societal situation (Eder, 2014; Wimmer, 2013). This could make ‘the battleground of European identity’ one of the more fundamental debates of the near future (Kohli, 2000; Karolewski, *et al.*, 2016).

#### *Remaining obstacles in European identity formation*

So, while there is an increasing amount of empirical evidence that European identity can take up its role of unifying diverse groups of people (Clycq, 2017; Agirdag, *et al.*, 2016; Teney, *et*

*al.*, 2016), there are a few caveats to remind ourselves of. Native (former) ethnic majority groups still hold the dominant positions in many countries, and a shift in power will take a long time (Lukes, 2005). Even in times of rapidly increasing diversity, reactions from leading politicians in various European countries have shown that playing the national identity card, introducing ideological screening instruments and talking about the upcoming clash of civilizations seems a viable political strategy. The idea of the ‘return of the national’ fits well into this framing (Triandafyllidou, 2017).

Moreover, despite the idea that, in comparison to national identities, a European identity is perceived by many as rather values-based than ethnic and/or soil-based, there are multiple examples of how the idea of ‘being a genuine or authentic’ European is used to exclude ‘the other’. Some native majority and ethnic minority individuals apply this frame to exclude other minorities – mainly of Muslim and/or sub-Saharan African background – from European identity. Moreover, minorities with a European migration background can apply this strategy to realign themselves – based on their assumed shared European background – with the dominant ethnic native group in the country they are living in and position themselves in the power structure closer to the native group. Thus, also with respect to processes of (European) identification from a minorities’ perspective it is important to acknowledge the diversity among minority groups. For example this abovementioned strategy was used in Switzerland by some Italian minorities to exclude Albanian and Turkish minorities from the European imagination (Wimmer, 2004), in France by some Spanish minorities to exclude Algerian minorities (Champagne, 1993) and in Belgium by some Italian and Polish minorities to exclude Turkish and Moroccan minorities from being part of European identity (Clycq 2012, 2015). In each case the narrative was similar to ‘well, I might not be ‘genuine’ Swiss/French/Belgian, but at least I’m European’ making the imagination of a European ethnicity sufficiently real to argue why some individuals are not considered as legitimate members of this collectivity.

Thus also power relations between minorities will play a role and we already see some minorities realigning with national ethnic majority groups to preserve their (or gain a more privileged) position in society (Lukes, 2005; Wimmer, 2013). This could undermine the construction of a cosmopolitan European identity that surpasses national identities if this European identity will be ethno-culturally based rather than based on shared democratic values irrespective of religion, ethnicity and so forth. Despite many signals that the rapid diversification of European cities is changing the construction of national identities, there are countersignals showing it can also be replaced by 'more of the same' (Jenkins, 2008b). Moreover, even though scholars such as Asad (2003) argue that European identity should be an identity based on all being minorities as to incorporate the diversity present, the practice of in- and exclusion and the reasoning that democratic values are only for 'deserving' in-group members could undermine these unifying tendencies (van Oorschot, *et al.* 2008).

### **Reformulating 'United in diversity', beyond the 'homogeneous nation'**

Thus, it remains an important question how the complex opportunity we are confronted with, as Alba (2009) argues, will be dealt with. Considering the social and political implications, the question remains how the tension between the current resurgence of nationalism and the (potential) rise of European identity formation will play out. Will the demographically rapidly growing group of ethnic minorities (in combination with the inflow of new migrants and refugees) become a decisive force in these processes? Will the latter be the future of European identity and unity and can they help articulate a stronger European cohesion based on shared values, or will dominant native national groups in society mainly seek support from those minorities that share a supposedly exclusive European background with the aim to preserve their dominant position? These remain difficult questions to answer as various scenario's seem

plausible, especially amidst a weakened European Union that finds it difficult to take a leading role in this discussion.

Also from an academic standpoint important questions emerge. The ethno-cultural diversification of European cities (and beyond) might precisely give a new impetus to the construction of an inclusive European imaginary (Taylor, 2004). However, currently ethnic minorities and migrants – especially those that are socially vulnerable or have an Islamic and/or non-European migration background – seem to be left out of these processes (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2015). As Teney, *et al.* (2016) argue, there seems to be a sense of European belonging or Europeanness among the individuals with an immigration background that research is not really engaging with and this is precisely what we need to address. This is a reality that cannot be denied. However, this issue can only be adequately studied if the methodological and empirical approach to European identity formation is lifted to a new level enabling a broader understanding of the ontology and epistemology of European identity formation (Latcheva, *et al.*, 2012). Yet, such a comprehensive, comparative and in-depth longitudinal research design allowing to reveal the causal dynamics of European identity formation is currently lacking (Recchi, 2014).

These research questions are crucial to study as the internalization of European identity is happening at a young age and thus to be expected relatively stable. Children as young as ten years old already identify as European (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2015). Moreover, even Turkish origin ten year-olds – born in Flanders – already identify more as European than they identify as Belgian or Flemish (Agirdag, *et al.*, 2016). Interestingly, their Muslim background is no obstacle to identify as European, while it hampers their identification – and acceptance as – (sub)national citizens (Clycq, 2011). Taking into account that in cities across Europe (from Antwerp to Rotterdam, Paris and London), more than 60 or 70% of the youngsters has an

immigrant background, we are again encouraged to rethink European identity formation processes.

Thus, the future of European societies will depend heavily on the processes ensuing out of these diversification processes, and more importantly how they are addressed by policy makers but also in everyday interaction. However, this is not only a task for policy makers, but also researchers need to be open to study these new processes and acknowledge ethnic minorities as key actors in these societal issues and domains.

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