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The Notion of Identity

According to psychologist Erik Erikson, identity means, “a system of self-definitions of the social actor”. This modern sense of identity denotes not only “sameness”, but also an image according to which one associates and projects oneself. Michael Wintle said that the most important feature of identity is its multiple nature. It is possible to have a single identity but it will always be made up of several separate identifications, some of which might be contradictory. Some are stronger than the others and the pattern can change over time. People are often influenced by multiple identities that apply based on circumstances such as national, racial, social and language identities.

We can say that national identity is an expression of politically oriented collective consciousness that results in the common will to act and work together and integrates people by mobilising their emotional bonds¹. In other words, it is the national identity that welds people into one nation. Wintle agrees with such a conception in saying that “perhaps the most remarkable feature of national identity and feeling is that it can unite sometimes wildly different people into powerful alliances, without them even sharing the same ideology.”²

National identity and European identity

Obviously, a united Europe arises from pluralism: linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as institutional diversity in which each carries a strong cultural and political tradition. The European political project cannot ignore this plurality within which various national cultures are necessarily expressed. Therefore, the European identity cannot be the sum of these various cultures but a space where they are all in relation. It can be perceived as some kind of envelope that includes senses of belonging to different nations, minorities and various ethnic groups of our continent.

How does globalisation or further integration of the European Union affect the nation-state and the sense of national identity? Both are very complex phenomenon and we can distinguish between their economic and cultural dimensions. As a result of economic factors, especially growing internationalisation of the global economy and the increasing importance of multinational companies, there is a tendency towards one world - meaning that more and more people tend to identify with large transnational entities (e.g.- the European Union). But on the other hand, this can mean that the lower middle-class and working-class are more likely to identify with traditional nationalism. According to Stuart Hall, as a result of globalisation “one can see a regression to a very defensive and highly dangerous form of national identity which is driven by a very aggressive form of racism”³.

Decentralisation is another "product" of globalisation. Regions play a more and more important role in Europe. Their increasing role can be explained by the initiatives on the part of state, as

¹ Böckenförde E. –W (1995): *Naród. Tożsamość w swych różnych postaciach*, in: *Tożsamość w czasach zmiany. Rozmowy z Castel Gandolfo*, Kraków

² M. Wintle (1996): *Cultural identity in Europe*, England: Avebury

³ S. Hall (1993): *The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity*, in King, A D (ed.) *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, Binghamton: Macmillan.

well by the regional policy of the EU. Regions offer alternative foci of identity to the national identity, which leads to either a single regional identity (Corsican, Basque, Scottish) or to a dual identity (British-Scottish, Corsican-French, Basque-Spanish). Those tendencies lead to the conclusion that the nature of nation-state and national identity has been modified over recent years. However, the question whether the nation-state will survive as the principal unit of the international political system and the principal focus of collective identity or whether it will be submerged by transnational entities or fragmented into smaller units remains uncertain. But we have to admit that European countries still remain in the world of nations even if their nature has been undergoing important changes. One can argue that national identity is the most important and the most "natural" identity of the modern man. However, the spheres in which modern man pursues his interests and build communities are not inherently linked with territorially limited boundaries of the nation-state. Hence it is conceivable that the identity of individuals, which has been rooted in their nationality, may lose its predominant role.

The question of European cultural identity is particularly important nowadays. As has already been mentioned above, it is being seen as a parallel development to the construction of a European Union - a development that could give the European project both internal and external legitimacy. There are several factors that played a decisive role in European unification. Some of them include: external threats, feelings of community that derive from Christianity, and the interests of particular states. Some scholars argue that the process of western European integration, as a shift of powers from the nation-state to the EU is paralleled by the dissolution of the traditional identity construction in the form of nationalist "front lines" between European countries. With the dissolution of those fronts, a necessary condition for creating a European identity has been met. That condition will be sufficient when it would consist of the social cement, based on the belief that others are of the same community⁴. Looking for definition of European identity we cannot refer to such important notions for creation of a national identity such as a common language, religion, origin, or tradition. So the meaning of European identity refers to the notion of European cultural heritage which can be understood as the common European historical experience, which consists of Roman and Greek humanism, Christianity, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, rationalism, romanticism and socialist doctrines. In other words, the notion of European identity can be understood as a set of certain values and ideas, which stem out of common European cultural heritage, the basis of which a "real sense" of European consciousness can be developed, is complementary to the notion of national identity. Moreover, it could define itself through national identity: a sense of belonging to Europe can be expressed by a strong sense of belonging to one nation.

Habermas assumed that national identity in contemporary Europe is formed by allegiance to the political principle of democracy and the constitutional state, which has however, to be reflected through the prism of the specific national culture and historical memory. The nation in this context should take a form of civic-nation. In other words, the idea of European citizenship would enable coexistence of many national identities and it will not demand that they will disappear. Europe as a space of citizenship adds new element to the individual's choice of identity: thinking of oneself as European. The European culture cannot ignore the diversity of national cultures, languages and territorial and non territorial identities. Thus, a European space cannot be constructed unless these identities are preserved as its constitutive elements.

⁴ D. Fuchs, J. Gerhard's, E. Roller *Nationalism versus Euro centrism? The Construction of Collective Identities in Western Europe*, in: Marco Martiniello, *Migration, Citizenship and National Identities in the European Union*, Aldershot: Avebury

Conclusion:

There is no winning formula for a successful Europe. A key question is the question of European identity and the common denominator of European values. Just one look at European history could reveal problems for European unification: wars, conflicts and divisions were common. However, the basis for this unification lies in efforts to make those existing differences irrelevant. An advantage of Europe is its potential to live with others. A European spirit already lies in each distinct cultural identity as its valuable and civilization component. Unity in differences is the principle that in the best way expresses European identity.

The process of Europeanisation, much like the process of globalisation, requires - despite the integration into global economy - political, social, and cultural alignments among nations and it is a source of an identity anxiety. But if we consider European identity as a common cultural heritage of Europe, we could conclude that national identity and European identity are not contradictory notions but compatible ones. "Identity is usually multiple and potentially integrational, so there is no ostensible reason to why a European identity should not exist alongside national one, in the same way the nation already exist alongside gender, race, age and all the other aspects of identity which we have"⁵ The only problem is that the consciousness of this identity has not been yet sufficiently developed.

⁵ Wintle, Michael (1996): *Culture and Identity*, England: Avebury

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