

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?  
EUROPEAN IDENTITY AND THE  
REIMAGINATION OF ETHICAL POLITICS  
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE  
MIGRATION CRISIS OF 2015/2016

**Tamara PEICU, Mag.**

*University of Vienna, Austria*

*tamara.peicu@gmail.com*

*“Remember you were once foreigners...”*

*(Leviticus 19:34)*

---

**Abstract:** Identity, Christian ethics and migration are often seen as descriptive concepts of dissensive qualities involving static, perene aspects versus dynamism and change. However, the opposite can be argued when looking at identity as a flowing, organically changing notion in contrast to a rigid and inflexible migration concept all of those being embedded in an ideological context of Christian and/or humanistic politics. This article highlights the points of intersectionality between national and European identity and analyzes the political impact of the recent migration waves to Europe on the process of identity formation within the European Union. It also describes the identity conflicts among European citizens of diverse nationalities and, at the same time, the phenomenon of *othering* between Europeans and refugees.

**Keywords:** *European identity, migration, refugees politics, immigrants, neighbour*

---

## **1. Introduction**

This article's title and main topic link together several important concepts: identity, migration and ethics within refugees politics. Firstly, let's look at identity versus migration: at first sight and considering the intrinsic, linguistic qualities of the words, one might assume that the former has a

static, descriptive quality, while the latter is characterized by dynamism and change. However, as it is to be seen, a deeper approach will show that the opposite could be observed as well: identity as a flowing, organically changing notion and migration as a rigid and inflexible construct which only labels and creates an ideatic space for otherness to flourish. Thus, it is important to identify and describe the factors that contribute and trigger the points of intersectionality between the (reinvention of) national identity and a (designed) European identity and analyze the impact of the migration waves to Europe of last years on the process of identity but also policy formation.

## 2. What is Identity?

Oxford Dictionary defines identity as “the fact of being who or what a person or thing is” and/or “The characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is.”<sup>1</sup> As persons are proverbially complex entities with many and diverse facets of being, the identity needs specific qualifiers in order to be described: there are personal identities, gender identities, social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious identities... and the list could continue.

Pertinent to the present endeavor here, I will refer to the concept of social identity as described by Charles Stangor in his work *Social Identity Theory*: “we draw part of our sense of identity and self-esteem from the social groups that we belong to.”<sup>2</sup> Narrowing down on the idea of identity as a cognitive-social construct in context of ethnicity and/or nationality, I see nationality as a person’s sense of belonging to one ethnic group, one state or one nation.

## 3. National Identity vs. European Identity

National identity can thus be described as belonging to a social group held together as a cohesive whole by distinctive traditions, culture, language and politics.<sup>3</sup>

1 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/identity>, retrieved on 11.29.2019.

2 Stangor, 2011 <https://opentextbc.ca/socialpsychology/chapter/the-social-self-the-role-of-the-social-situation/>.

3 Richard D, Ashmore, Lee Jussim, David Wilder (eds.), *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp.74 - 75.

Klaus Eder argues that the concept of identity represent a narrative about boundaries, common history, common culture language, myths of origin and belonging which has the purpose of creating meaning. But then, if one was to build on Eder's argument and to apply it to European identity, it becomes clear that in this case there is a misalignment among the cohesive elements. From the start, the two concepts seem to engage in a contentious interaction: the "organically and naturally emerged" national identity versus the "artificial, designed by the elites" European identity.<sup>4</sup>

The European project was created with the aim of ending the frequent and bloody wars between neighbouring European countries in the wake of the Second World War. As of 1950, the European Coal and Steel Community began to unite European countries economically and politically in order to secure a lasting peace.<sup>5</sup>

Even if the reasoning was practical and logical, it came into being artificially and brought together nations which traditionally had relationships characterized by conflict and rivalry.

The next decades saw an enlargement of the Union both in terms of influence and activity fulminating with the achievements of the last 20 years among which the most popular were:

- the Single Market which was completed with the four freedoms: of goods, services, people and capital,
- the Schengen agreement which gradually allowed people to travel without having their passports checked at European inner borders,
- barrier-free studies: millions of young people studied in other countries with EU support,
- and the Union's new currency which was gradually introduced.

In the last 10-15 years, there was an increase in development of supranational governance, also conditioned by international events - like the finance crisis of 2007/2008 - which rendered necessary the creation of European financial institutions with supranational mandate.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, the approach to the European identity as both a common heritage as well as a vision for a common future is deeply conflicted (interestingly enough, the narrative uses the term European

---

4 Klaus Eder, "Europe's Borders: the Narrative Construction of the Boundaries of Europe", in *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 9, (May 2006), pp. 255 - 271.

5 [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history\\_en#1945-1959](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_en#1945-1959).

6 [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history\\_en#2000-%E2%80%932009](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_en#2000-%E2%80%932009).

*integration* much more frequent than *identity* - maybe to signal the dynamism of the process and its stages? )... Nevertheless, as an artificial construct, the European Union and its ideology were designed to draw their legitimacy only from the public support... and this support wavered for the better part of last decade in the face of what was perceived a continuous decline of national sovereignty. Thus, the identity- driven motivations, the utilitarian/pragmatic ones and the third parties<sup>7</sup> - mostly social media-, have engaged in a highly conflicted process of identity formation led by inflammable narrative. Complementary to these categories I add a fourth battleground which, I would argue, is missing in Hamann' paper: education.

The European dimension in education has two main strands: First, there is the inclusion of a European dimension in all the relevant subjects. Second, there is the specific curriculum on the European Union, with content on its historical origins and process of formation, the political economic foundations, its values, institutions, and how they impact the everyday life of European citizens.<sup>8</sup>

In 2017, EUROCLIO (European Association of History Educator) - on European Commission's mandate -, brought together educators from all 28 EU member states to research how European integration is taught in secondary school education across Europe; their findings could be summarized as following:

1. The European Project and European integration are presented as arising primarily from material interests of nation-states (such as prosperity or peace) rather than ideas and values (such as solidarity or European unity).

2. The textbooks used in classes tend to emphasize treaties, political figures and institutions rather than the actual connection of European integration to everyday lives of citizens (such as European citizenship). Students could thus get the view of an elitist project that is not as relevant for their lives as the respective nation-state is, and the European project is presented as a succession of treaties rather than a lively project arising from shared values and identity.

---

7 Johann Georg Hamann, „Das Volk und Die da oben. Misstrauen und Entfremdung in Europa“, *DGAPkompakt: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik*, 2016.

8 Hartmann, Montlahuc, Rogozin, Stegers, *Europe Final-Research-Report..* [online] EUROCLIO - European Association of History Educators. 2017, available at: <https://euroclio.eu/> retrieved on 12.03.2019.

3. Many textbooks do highlight positive outcomes of European integration (such as the common market, peace, or cooperation), but all core challenges which the EU faces (migration, intra-EU differences, and ‘no challenges’) are questioning core values of the European idea, solidarity and shared identity and are not represented in the manuals as debates nor as common themes.<sup>9</sup>

The visuals in textbooks are pictures, maps and cartoons. The main topics of the present EU are the common market and the Euroscepticism. Federalists are effectively neglected. All the pictures and cartoons lay the emphasis on the respective member state.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. The European Nationalism

Furthering this concept of tension and conflict between national and European identity, let's take a closer look at the core of the nationalist ideology as it has endeavored to reinvent itself in the European narrative and, more recently, in the context of the migrant crisis due (mainly) to the Syrian civil war.

The right-wing, populist European political movements have a long tradition on the political arena with corner stones that have always been there like provocative, xenophobic statements or explicit anti-immigrant platforms; other elements changed over time going from a small government and free market agenda to supporting pro nationalist social democracy principles like national welfare states, benefits and social programs... but only conationals.<sup>11</sup>

According to Eger & Valdez the ideological paradigm of nationalism (or neo-nationalism as they differentiate) shifted from nation-building to nation-maintaining, thus from creating to conserving and preserving national law, traditions, values or ethnic unity.<sup>12</sup> The

9 Hartmann, Montlahuc, Rogozin, Stegers, *Europe Final-Research-Report..* [online] EUROCLIO - European Association of History Educators. 2017, available at: <https://euroclio.eu/> retrieved on 12.03.2019.

10 Hartmann, Montlahuc, Rogozin, Stegers, *Europe Final-Research-Report..* [online] EUROCLIO - European Association of History Educators. 2017, available at: <https://euroclio.eu/> retrieved on 12.03.2019.

11 Maureen Eger, Sarah Valdez, “Neo-nationalism in Western Europe”, in *European Sociological Review*, vol 31 (2015), pp.150-130.

12 Maureen Eger, Sarah Valdez, “Neo-nationalism in Western Europe”, in *European Sociological Review*, vol 31 (2015), p.117.

ideology, however, can be vague, as the European nationalist movements are - through their nature-, populist movements, protest parties, focused on dismantling an existing political direction, and, consistent with the populist concept, more often than not, not following with a consistent political program, the essence of their movement being the protest as such. This is why their political agendas can cover both the left and the right political views. Hence, it is not surprising that the European Union and its ideology became the personification of all things bad in the eyes of the neo-nationalist movements across Europe characterized by a strong euroscepticism.

The European elections held in 2014 saw a shift to the right as more Eurosceptics were elected into the European Parliament. Since then some earth-shattering events took place: Trump's presidency, Brexit, Brazil's new far right presidency, Hungary and Polen declared allegiance to "illiberal democracies" and of course, the COVID 19 pandemic. Interestingly enough, the tip of the spear in the far right rhetoric was migration and almost only migration.<sup>13</sup> The public discourse was (still is) characterized by othering through the vilifying of non-white people and of cultural and religious diversity, a profound stereotyping of immigrants as a uniform group and a rhetoric of fear for one's existence in light of the threat posed by a foreign, unknown migrant. The usage of opposing elements like *us vs them*, *in vs out*, *superior vs. inferior*, *civilized vs uncivilized*, *aggression vs defensiveness* automatically positions the public in the context of combativeness.

## 5. The Refugees Crisis

And if, for sake of the argument, we would say that migrants, free movers, economic migrants and refugees do (!) have distinct claims that liberal democracies must respond to, whom should European states let in first or in larger numbers?

From a moral perspective the obvious answer seems to be: those who have the strongest needs. Should Europe then close its doors to economic migrants and its internal borders for mobile EU citizens until it has taken in a sufficient number of asylum seekers and resettled refugees? Something is clearly wrong with this answer...

---

<sup>13</sup> Erik Tillman, "Authoritarianism and citizen attitudes towards European integration", in *European Union Politics*, vol. 14, 2013, pp. 566-589.

If Europe stops internal free movement, its member states are likely to be less open for economic migrants and refugees both in terms of economic capacities and political attitudes; and looking around the world which wealthy democracies have taken in more refugees, these often turn out to be the same countries that have run extensive economic immigration programmes. Although it is certainly true at the local level that refugees, economic migrants and less skilled resident workers often compete for the same jobs, at the aggregate level the admission capacity of countries is not a fixed number but tends to expand with their general openness to migration and mobility.

For a political ethics of migration, it follows that states can be expected to honor the different admission claims in their own terms and may be entitled to limit numbers or impose conditions. What they must not do is adding up all immigrants in a single quota and closing their borders once that threshold has been reached. This problem goes beyond what a general political ethics of migration can deliver and requires political and administrative skills more than theoretical insights. The context matters for the ethics of migration – not only for explaining the different challenges that countries face because of their history or geographic location, but also normatively, in the sense of special responsibilities for neighbors.

The Mediterranean was once the cradle of European civilization. Now it has become a graveyard for many who try to reach European shores. Europe shares a historic responsibility for economic and political crises in the neighborhood that it colonized in the past. Today, Europe's future and identity formation depends not only on keeping its internal borders open and defending democratic values against authoritarian governments that have sprung up in its midst, but also on how it responds to migration across the Mediterranean.

## 6. Conclusion

On the course of this article, I've endeavored to mirror the concepts of national vs. European identity and see how the recent narrative on migration within the context of ethical politics can serve or prejudice them. And although the migrant waves at the middle of this decade didn't create the European nationalist predicament, it surely offered a platform

and helped become main stream politics and a socially acceptable credo. It's true, the scale of the sudden influx of people to Europe in recent years is like nothing Europe had seen in decades; and still it bears no comparizon to the numbers of refugees accepted by Lebanon, Turkey or Uganda. Most of those fleeing conflict seek help first from their near neighbors. An still... Europe' politics felt overwhelmed.

Like it or not, politics affects all of our lives. It should enable us to make choices as communities, cities and countries that create a shared good life despite changing circumstances. It it should manage and administer material and spiritual resources for the good of the community. The question of who does and does not deserve our resources is one that hauntes public discourse in respect of migration and refugees. As the crisis in response to refugees arriving in Europe reached its noisiest point in 2015, there were frenetic attempts to choose and select, divide and label, so as to avoid any duty or obligation to those arriving in need. Were they economic migrants or refugees? Syrian refugees might have been worthier that Africans? What about Iraqis and Afghans? Or hidden refugees from Burundi, South Sudan and Eritrea?

This suspicious and censorious division was reflected in politicians' as well as public discourse, and triggered the creation of a space for extremism to grow. Absurd idea of othering on the base of different skin color, faith, economic status or ethnicity began to feel like sensible policy to those who already had had a latent idea of us versus the world. This destabilizing change happened on multiple levels and it combined with the national and European challenges in terms of receiving and integrating the refugees waves.

Nevertheless, since late 2017 one can observe a shift in the public perception of European identity, especially among the demographic 20-40 years old both in Europe but also in Austria. A Parliament Eurobarometer survey, published in May 2018, one year before European elections in May 2019, confirmed a growing support for the European Union from the European citizens (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/eurobarometer-2018-democracy-on-the-move>).

The elections for the European Parliament in May 2019 saw an increase in participation as The European Parliament's Post-Election Eurobarometer, - a survey on 28000 people throughout EU-, showed: "The most common reason for voting in the recent European Parliament

elections was because people felt it was their duty as a citizen (52%), and this has gained in importance since 2014 (+11 pp). Compared with 2014, respondents are also more likely to say that they are in favour of the EU (25%, +11 pp) and because voting can make things change (18%, +6 pp).<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the attitude regarding the European membership has changed since 2014: “Just under six in ten Europeans (59%) see their country’s EU membership as a good thing. This level of support is unchanged since February–March 2019, but fell slightly since the historical high level recorded in September 2018 (62%). However, the long-term trend is positive since 2011 and in particular since autumn 2014, after the previous European elections. In the EU28 overall, more than two-thirds of respondents (68%) think their country has benefited from EU membership, the joint highest level recorded since 1983. A majority of people in all Member States – except for Italy – share this view.”<sup>15</sup>

If these surveys can serve as indicators for popular preferences concerning the elections on national and European level, it could be that the events of the last decade, the rise of the right and its ideology triggered a counter-movement within the social society and a counter rhetoric based on inclusion, diversity and a mutually inclusive identity. So, who is your neighbour?<sup>16</sup>

## References

- ✦ Ashmore, Richard D, Jussim Lee, Wilder David (eds.), *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.
- ✦ Charles, Stangor, “The Social Self: The Role of the Social Situation” in *Principles of Social Psychology* <https://opentextbc.ca/socialpsychology/chapter/the-social-self-the-role-of-the-social-situation/> retrieved on 11.30.2019.

---

14 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019/post-election-survey-2019-complete-results/report/en-post-election-survey-2019-report.pdf>.

15 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019/post-election-survey-2019-complete-results/report/en-post-election-survey-2019-report.pdf>.

16 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Plea for Human Dignity”, *Scientia Moralitas. Human Dignity - A Contemporary Perspectives*, The Scientia Moralitas Research Institute, Beltsville, MD, United States of America, Vol. 1, No.1., (2016), pp. 29-43.

- ✦ Eder, Klaus, "Europe's Borders: the Narrative Construction of the Boundaries of Europe", in *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 9, May 2006, 255 - 271.
- ✦ Eger, Maureen, and Valdez, Sarah, "Neo-nationalism in Western Europe", in *European Sociological Review*, vol 31, (2015), 115-130.
- ✦ Erik, Tillman, "Authoritarianism and citizen attitudes towards European integration", in *European Union Politics*, vol. 14, (2013), 566-589.
- ✦ Hamann, Johann Georg, „Das Volk und Die da oben. Misstrauen und Entfremdung in Europa“, *DGAPkompakt: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik*, (2016)
- ✦ Hartmann, Montlahuc, Rogozin, Stegers, *Europe Final-Research-Report..* [online] EUROCLIO - European Association of History Educators. 2017, available at: <https://euroclio.eu/> retrieved on 12.03.2019.
- ✦ Hartmann, Montlahuc, Rogozin, Stegers, *Europe Final-Research-Report..* [online] EUROCLIO - European Association of History Educators. (2017), 19-21, available at: <https://euroclio.eu/> retrieved on 12.03.2019.
- ✦ Hartmann, Montlahuc, Rogozin, Stegers, *Europe Final-Research-Report..* [online] EUROCLIO - European Association of History Educators. (2017), 23-24, available at: <https://euroclio.eu/> retrieved on 12.03.2019.
- ✦ Rotaru, Ioan-Gheorghe, "Plea for Human Dignity", *Scientia Moralitas. Human Dignity - A Contemporary Perspectives*, The Scientia Moralitas Research Institute, Beltsville, MD, United States of America, Vol. 1, No.1., (2016), 29-43.
- ✦ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/identity>, retrieved on 11.29.2019.
- ✦ [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history\\_en#1945-1959](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_en#1945-1959), retrieved on 11.26.2019
- ✦ European Union, [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history\\_en#2000-%E2%80%932009](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_en#2000-%E2%80%932009), retrieved on 12.02.2019
- ✦ Eurobarometer, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/eurobarometer-2018-democracy-on-the-move>, retrieved on 11.21.2019.
- ✦ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019/post-election-survey-2019-complete-results/report/en-post-election-survey-2019-report.pdf>, retrieved on 12.10.2019.