



# The Misguided Quest for European Identity

*by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi*

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The Greeks have a clear identity; they are patriotic and their governments, good or bad, suffer from no democratic deficit. They are representative for Greece. Does identity or patriotism protect one from bad governance, on one hand, or social unrest when austerity policies become the only option available, on the other? Obviously not. So why then does identity matter at all in the policy realm?

Alina Mungiu-Pippidi argues in this essay that European identity is an overrated concept, and its use as a legitimizing device for a wide array of European policies (extremely varied in terms of breadth, scope and ideology) could have never worked. European identity is an ill-defined construct, with a shaky historical basis, fraught with confusion and misapprehension, not in the least between 'core Europe' and 'new' Europe. A supra-national identity which transcends both language, the most salient of the natural identity markers and traditional ideology is simply too general and non-specific to have a significance, to be operationalized, measured and have a serious weight in people's decisions against more traditional preferences. Furthermore, she argues that that by eliminating completely the individual level of psychological 'identity' and confining the discussion to the macro, inter-governmental and policy level, a more objective European 'identity' results, one which is really central to the European Union and explains the tensions embedded within. The identity of Europe lies in the European standards, from food to the Schengen demanding border controls. United Europe is a body of laws and the commitment to enforce them. Were any peripheral states on the border of EU at the level of European standards, their integration would be instantaneous, be they Turkey, Ukraine or even Morocco, as it had already happened with Sweden or Austria. European borders do not separate identities, but the capacity of enforcing similar standards: without formally being part of Europe, Norway and Switzerland are more and more 'Europeanized'. Their border with Europe therefore matters less than some current internal borders of European Union: having set a wrong border to the Euro has become Europe's current most important problem.

Is an EU identity at all necessary for complying with EU rule and adopting EU standards? Scholars have two overall hypotheses to this compliance riddle, one rationalist, the other constructivist. Rationalists emphasize coercion, cost/benefit calculations, and material incentives, whereas constructivists emphasize social learning, socialization, and social norms. Both agree, however, that to endorse European standards one has to believe in the political and economical project of Europe. Mungiu-Pippidi argues that successful Europeanization so far was the one which saw EU as a mean to reach the standards, and not the other way around. European citizens do endorse Europe, but in an instrumental sense: to paraphrase Bentham, who forged the famous slogan of utilitarianism that 'we believe in freedom and effective drainage', Europe is popular as long as it provides effective drainage. Presuming that European identity can be a means to make accepted every economic context and every policy, regardless of personal preferences and costs of EU citizens is too great a belief in the power of pure propaganda. If nations have to prove themselves everyday in a virtual plebiscite, as Ernest Renan once argued, EU even more so.

At the end of day, we are reminded Winston Churchill's famous saying that socialism can work only in Heaven where they do not need it, or in Hell where they already have it. European identity works reasonably well as a propaganda device in countries that want to emulate the European standards, and is redundant, if not invisible in the countries which already have them. The euro crisis has thus at least a benefit: to have brought to the fore European issues of an instrumental problem solving nature, leaving in a shadow the obscure questions about European identity.



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