EUROPEAN IDENTITY – A WORK IN PROGRESS

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Abstract. Beyond the inviting Europeanist rhetoric – based on concepts such as *peace, prosperity, democracy, human rights* – the construction of the European Union has many cracks, and the adoption of some of the suggested solutions risk turning the cracks into craters. In such a climate, cultural policy assumes a key role in constructing a narrative designed to forge Euro-citizens. This article aims to develop an image of the European Union and uses a *soft power* tool as a development agent – the European Heritage Label.

Keywords: *EU; Cultural Policy; Identity; Heritage; European Heritage Label*

A Divided Union

"If it does not fall apart, it certainly weakens" (Kaplan, 2019a: 259) – such is the prediction of Robert D. Kaplan, an important foreign policy analyst, regarding the future of the European Union – a prediction motivated by the existence of deep fault lines from the past, but also by the coexistence of "several Europes", each with its own project and centre of power (Kaplan, 2019b: 260). Regardless of how we would qualify them – realistic, alarmist, critical, apocalyptic – there are many such analyses that dissect the project of the European Union but are unable to find its core. Moreover, historian Timothy Garton Ash noted as early as 2007 the inability of the European Union to weave a shared narrative: "Europe no longer knows what story it wants to tell" (Ash, 2007).

The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC, 1951), initially set up as an appendage of the United States of America (rather than as a new pole of power) with the aim of preventing new armed confrontations, came to favour the economic factor (European Economic Community – EEC, 1957) and eventually embraced a political project (European Union – EU, 1992). And 33 years after Maastricht, it doesn't just look vulnerable, it is vulnerable. In fact, it is increasingly being labelled as the "sick man of Europe", a phrase once reserved for the Ottoman Empire (Stokes, 2013). European leaders themselves have recognized the development

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of an existential crisis and the drawing closer of collapse: "Europe is going through an existential crisis" (Jean-Claude Juncker, 14/09/2016); "Europe may die" (Emmanuel Macron, 24/04/2024); "Europe is a garden. The rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle can invade the garden" (Josep Borrell, 13/10/2024).

The ancient dichotomies and newer fragmentations – North *versus* South; East *versus* West; the Schengen area and the rest; the Franco-German "hard core" and the others – have eroded the solidarity of the European Union; the waves of the "perfect storm" that swept over it – recession, migrants, pandemic, Euroscepticism – fuelled resentment; the wind has blown Euroscepticism this way and that; and Brexit has shown not only that its future is subject to reinterpretation, but even more, that regression is possible. In this context, historian John Gillingham even wrote the obituary of European Union (Gillingham, 2016).

Haunted by the spectre of disintegration, energy and resource shortages, demographic winter and *de facto* wars[1], the European Union has been at a crossroads for some time. And before it lies chasms and swamps. Because its fragility is structural, stemming from its very birth and from its congenital heterogeneity, and the difficulty of manufacturing a cohesive identity is a reality, not an impression. And fear (whether of Russia, economic collapse, immigrants or Eurosceptics) cannot be a long-term driver of cohesion. Under these circumstances, the European Union risks appearing as a diplomatic fiction, with discourses and meetings staged on Brussels studios.

The causes of this image of the European Union are many and not shrouded in mystery at all, but widely debated from both philosophical and political perspectives. Medievalist Rémi Brague highlighted the eccentric nature of European identity and its need to "reconcile with the past", to return to essences. Otherwise, amnesia, the forgetfulness of cultural and spiritual roots, the temptation to turn the past into a *tabula rasa*, secularism, and Eurocentrism lead to a loss of reference points, to moral relativism, the undermining of human dignity, apathy and uprooting (Brague, 1995). Political causes are no less serious and encompass several aspects. Whether it is a constructive critique, such as that of Jürgen Habermas, which aims at reforming rather than dismantling the European Union (Habermas, 2012), or an ontological critique, such as that of Pierre Manent, which targets the European Union's claim to govern Europe in the absence of a European *demos* (Manent, 2009), the discrepancy between the declared values – the defence of democracy –

[1] In the absence of a formal declaration of war, by sending arms and financial support from the European Defence Fund to Ukraine, the European Union has become a belligerent party in this war rather than a balancing factor, failing to act as a peace-keeping mediator. Josep Borrell himself, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has adopted the rhetoric of war by stating that "the war will be won on the battlefield" (Borrell, 2022), and "if Russia wins, the EU is in danger" (Borrell, 2023). The plea for war is all the more disconcerting given that the European Union emerged as a result of the trauma of war in order to contribute to a sustainable peace through cooperation, and it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. Moreover, the negotiations after the Alaskan summit (August 2025) are being conducted under the Orwellian expression "War is peace". The renowned analyst Noam Chomsky proposed a critical reading of the present through the lens of the past and, without minimizing Russian aggression, recalled the post-Cold War commitments regarding the limits of NATO enlargement while denouncing the escalation of the conflict through the actions undertaken by the EU and NATO (Chomsky, 2022). In fact, the seasoned diplomat Henry Kissinger had issued this warning as early as 2014 (Kissinger, 2014).

and the reality of the "democratic deficit" is markedly striking. This has been due to the transfer of political power from the national states to the European Union institutions, and to the peculiar fact that the institution elected by the citizens (the Parliament) is the weakest. A substantive critique envisages drawing up a post-national project aspiring to replace the nation with a supranational administration of Eurocrats, specific to post-democracy (Crouch, 2004) – a concept coined by Colin Crouch, which designates a regime in which the political elite can impose its ideas without real popular consensus and can ignore, for example, the undesirable result of a referendum, such as the one that rejected the European Constitution (2005). All this, but not only this, has led to the crisis of legitimacy for the European Union, evident since the project for a European Constitution was stillborn[2], and accentuated in the context of the recurring crises of 2008, 2015, 2020, 2022. *Resilience* is a fashionable word, a euphemism required for camouflaging reality.

Proposed solutions in political and academic environments are not fewer, but they are not compatible. Federalism is supported, among others, by politicians such as Guy Verhofstadt, who forget that the European Union is made up of nations, whether "imagined or invented" (Smith, 1991), and not of districts, provinces, counties, while "a Europe of nations" is the ideal for which the sovereigntist parties militate. Conservative and nationalist discourse calls for reconnection with the cultural and Christian values that have forged Europe (Scruton, 2014), in the context of an identity crisis aggravated by immigration, multiculturalism and "political correctness" that tends to rewrite the past, forcing it to re/position itself on the progressive mold – from so-called inclusive language to the revision of history and art, to the demolition of certain statues etc. From the perspective of the Eurocrats, however, the alleged crisis would be limited to a series of challenges faced by a society in full transformation, and any retrograde discourse on it is dismissed as anachronistic, nostalgic and focused on demonizing the other. Finally, given that "interdependence no longer generates integration, but urges disintegration", another solution would be to replace the current paradigm of centralised power in Brussels – EUphony or cacophony – with "simultaneous melodic lines" (Zielonka, 2015), an allusion to the polyphonic theory of Mihail Bakhtin. But polyphony also entails the risk of dissonance.

Beyond this framing, beyond this broad general plan that offers an overview of the European Union, we cannot fail to notice that only later an attempt to place a keystone over the common market and institutional bureaucracy – that is, over the economic and political dimension – was made. That is, a cultural dimension meant to create a European identity. That is, a cohesive spirit that would give this construct of the European Union "the breath of life".

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[2] Circumventing the absence of popular endorsement, the European Union reformulated and included provisions of the failed Constitution (2005) in the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). Thus, the EU acquired full legal personality and created the positions of President of the European Council and High Representative of Foreign Affairs (EUR-Lex, *sub voce*). The renowned legal scholar J.H.H. Weiler has very rigorously analysed the fracture between pro-European rhetoric and this recurrent *modus operandi* in EU practice (Weiler, 2011; Weiler, 2012).

A Battlefield?

In the texts of the founding treaties, the term *culture* was distinguished by omission. For thirty-five years, from the Treaty of Rome (1957) to the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), culture was not a priority objective of European integration, although starting with the second half of the 1970s, several documents of cultural significance were drawn up – the *European Charter of Architectural Heritage* (1975), the *European Parliament Resolution on the Programming of Community Action in the Field of Culture* (1979), the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Architectural Heritage of Europe* (Granada, 1985) – and two programs were launched that would prove successful – the *European Capital of Culture* (Athens, 1985) and the *European Cultural Routes* (Santiago de Compostela, 1987).

It was only with the Maastricht Treaty (1992) that the cultural dimension of European integration was formally recognised and the European Union's competences in the field of culture were established on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity (EUR-Lex, *sub voce*). Article 128 of the Treaty on European Union/ 1992 (and its updated version, respectively Article 167 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union/ 2007) stipulates that the European Union "respects national and regional diversity, while highlighting the common cultural heritage", "encourages cooperation between Member States", as well as "the preservation and protection of cultural heritage of European importance". This opened the perspective of cultural programs at Communitary level[3]. With this incongruity and tension between national and European, which had to be resolved (Shore, 2006: 16).

After the failure to adopt a European Constitution (2005), the European Union's interest in the cultural dimension gained a little more consistency, and after the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), culture gained a preeminence among European policies. Over time, the stakes of the cultural battle have increased, and the figures are an indication of this. The ongoing *Creative Europe* Programme/ 2021-2027 has a budget of €2.44 billion, up from €1.47 billion in the previous programme. And the budget for the future *AgoraEU* programme (2028-2034) is estimated at €8.6 billion (Culture Action Europe, 16/07/2025). But looked at from another angle, the same figures tell a different story. Devoting only 0.25% of the total EU budget to cultural policy points to another fracture in the Europeanist discourse – a fracture between the strategically valuable mission entrusted to culture (cohesion, identity) and the insignificant investment it makes in this area.

Even so, by re/activating the European Union culturally, the aim was to enliven a cumbersome gear. Culture has been politically instrumentalised, identified as a form of legitimisation, because there was a need for a "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1997) easily convertible into political capital. Thus, the cultural policy of the European Union, without denying diversity, proceeded to sort, remould and emphasise those values and symbols that encapsulate the idea of unity, of

[3] The framework programmes implemented by the EU were: *Caleidoscop* (1996-1999), *Ariane* (1997-1999), *Raphael* (1997-2000), *Culture 2000* (2000-2006), *Culture* (2007-2013), *Creative Europe* (2014-2020; 2021-2027).

Europeanism. Thus, a plethora of documents, conventions and programmes were designed for instilling a sense of belonging to the European Union and for arousing a feeling without which the EU's tangled narrative would fall apart. Josep Borrell's statement, in a harshly criticized discourse made in the autumn of 2022, is more than telling: "Identity is today the real battlefield" (Borrell, 13/10/2022).

A Chimera

The concept of *identity* (lat. *identitās* < *idem* – the same, identical) involves the idea of coagulated unity around shared cultural forms (language, myths, history, traditions, religion, symbols), manifest in an origin realm, the ancestral land (lat. *patrius-a-um* < *pater* – patria), which confers a sense of belonging and pride by sharing the values, rites, norms and practices of the community. The appeal to identity and the call for unity are usually launched in moments of crisis, when there is an absence or breakdown of identity.

The effort of the European Union to fabricate a European identity starts from the premise that the efficiency of its construct would increase if the citizens of the Member States were animated by common cultural attachments. But in a Europe that is plural by its very essence, with an intricate patchwork of languages, cultures and traditions, it is difficult to mould a single, widely shared identity along the lines of *E pluribus unum*. As a reminder, a sculpture depicting Europe's founding myth – the Rapture of Europe – is located in front of the EU Council building in Brussels. And the oxymoronic motto launched in 2000 – "Unity in Diversity" – refers precisely to this patchwork. But it is precisely this "manifold diversity in Europe which can, in fact, be perceived in the policy rhetoric as a problem that should be solved" (Lähdesmäki, 2014: 408).

The theme of the roots of European identity is a well-trodden one (Fontana 1994; Marino, 1995; Todorov, 2019; etc.) and, whatever the perspective adopted, it highlights the heritage of Greco-Roman classical culture, the fact that for many centuries *being Christian* was equivalent to *being European*, the role of Latin as a *lingua franca* in the ecclesiastical and academic environment until the dawn of the age of nationalism. But beyond this legacy, the construction of a top-down European identity appears rather utopian (Smith, 1992: 62). And yet, the concept of a European identity has been crafted as a political artefact.

In the Copenhagen Declaration (December 14, 1973), the term "European identity" was explicitly mentioned, albeit vaguely defined, as a shared sense of a common heritage. The background of the aforementioned declaration has its own meaning, as it was adopted at the Summit meeting against the backdrop of the oil crisis, as a tool for strengthening the place of the Europe of the Nine in the international order. In 1992, the concept of European identity was bringing with it another concept: "European citizenship". Article 8 of the TEU/ 1992 (respectively Article 20 of the TFEU/ 2007) states that it is automatically acquired by any citizen of an EU Member State, and that it "complements and does not replace national citizenship". Just like a Matrioshka doll or a Chinese

box, a citizen of an EU Member State would incorporate the local identity into the national one and the national identity into the supranational one and would feel simultaneously, as the case may be, either Oltenian, Romanian and European at the same time; or Basque, Spanish and European at the same time; or Sicilian, Italian and European at the same time and so on. And although the supranational identity surrounds the others, it still fails to engender attachments or loyalty.

The EU has thus shifted the focus from *ethnos* (ngr. □θνος – nation, kin), cultural identity, to *demos* (ngr. δ□μος – *citizens, people*), civic and legal identity, which implies belonging to a political community that shares universal values (human rights, free movement, etc). And the passage of time (from 1973 onwards) and the Eurobarometers (EB 77.4/ 2013; EB 79.5/2013) suggest that the invocation of the concepts of European identity and European citizenship in Europeanist rhetoric has not been sufficient for them to be incarnated. From this perspective, Cris Shore's conclusion is highly suggestive:

> EU leaders and institutions have failed to win the loyalty and affection of its would-be citizens, largely because there is still no such thing as a 'European public' as a self-recognizing category or body-political. The EU is thus an embryonic state without a nation; an administration without a government. It aspires to be a democracy, but cannot become one until there is a self-identifying European people or *demos*. And democracy without a demos is simply *cratos* (power) masked by *telos* (idealism) (Shore, 1999: 57).

In other words, without an expression of the popular will there is no legitimacy, and the construct of the European Union is an exercise of power that is being imposed under the guise of an ideal.

About the Past and the Future – Heritage

Special emphasis has been placed on European cultural heritage, which has become a priority for the cultural policy of the European Union. This concept has been used and abused. See *Convention on the Protection of European Archaeological Heritage* (Valletta, 1992), *European Heritage Days* (1999), *European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage* (2002), *Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (2005), *European Heritage Label* (2011), *European Year of Cultural Heritage* (2018) and so on.

Convinced that sharing the same heritage unites people, the European Union is looking "back to the future", its strategy being summarised in the slogan "Our Heritage: where past meets future" (2018). A word of Latin origin, the patrimony designates the obligation (lat. *mūnus, mūneris*) to preserve and pass on what is received from the father (lat. *pater familias*) and, by extrapolation, from one's ancestors. Heritage is the bond between ancestors and descendants, between past and future. The resurrection of the past inevitably involves an exercise of reactivating memory, selecting certain episodes and concealing others, re/interpreting facts and inserting new meanings. In fact, it involves weaving an official narrative capable of conferring meaning and consensus, creating a bridge over time and a communion of thoughts and feelings (Ricoeur, 2001).

Official discourses and cultural initiatives have been articulated around this pivotal word under the banner of the EU, which proceed to instrumentalise heritage and propose a cutting out of history from the perspective of the present (Sassatelli, 2009). This legitimacy strategy, reminiscent of the "faces of Janus" (Niklasson, 2017), involves selecting certain sequences from the past and excluding others that might recall antagonisms, interethnic tensions or past power relations. That is to say, the establishment of what Laurajane Smith calls "authorised heritage discourse (AHD)", a discourse that chooses which memories to legitimise and which memories to forget, as an expression of the power binomial constituted by heritage and politics (Smith, 2006).

The European Union "does things with words" (Austin, 2003), so in the "newspeak" (Orwell, 2023) designed to meet the ideological needs of Brussels, the same ideas and the same dozens of keywords are repeated. Clichés, constant repetitions are patented formulas for fixing ideas, specifically designed to re/form citizens and their attachments. The construction of a European identity is meant to be a cure for a divided Union in a crisis of legitimacy, and in "playing with the past" anything is possible (Boia, 1998). Both the deconstruction of national myths with potentially bellicose or so-called nativist remanence, and the construction of a supranational narrative, with the ultimate goal of creating a *different* kind of "imagined community" (Anderson, 2001). Hoping for the transfer of loyalty from the national state to the supranational construct, the narrative of the European Union is modelled on the nationalist narrative. Tim Marshall summarised this fundamental problem of the European Union with a suggestive comparison:

> The EU never succeeded in replacing the nation-state in the hearts of most Europeans (…) In 1861, Massimo d'Azeglio, one of the artisans of a unified Italy, said: «We made Italy; now we have to make Italians» (...) To create the EU and the Eurozone first and then Europeans is an infinitely more difficult project (Marshall, 2020: 207).

Although it shares some of the attributes of the nation-sates – flag, anthem, currency, institutions, motto – from the perspective of the citizens of the member states, the European Union plays a secondary or even marginal role. As of 2013, only 3% of the 505 million inhabitants of the EU Member States saw themselves as "only Europeans" (EB 77.4/2013).

European Heritage Label

In this background, the European Heritage Label (EHL) is yet another testimony of the European Union's challenge to forge a shared European identity. By designating certain sites as being of European importance, "places of memory" are becoming patented (Nora, 2008) and a "collective memory" is being constructed (Halbwachs, 2004).

The action itself involves selecting sites that have a certain symbolic significance and educational potential, with the aim of arousing the emotion and empathy of Europeans. Once selected, they are labelled and assigned a specially created logo, which suggests a European Union in search of the quintessence (lat. *quinta*

essencia): five multicoloured shapes, of distinct sizes and contours (diversity), are arranged radially but converge towards the same point, forming a pentacle (unity). A semiotic analysis meant to decipher deeper meanings would be interesting, but this is not the appropriate place for a *delectio morosa* (Eco, 2016).

The EHL was prefigured by the Joint Declaration of several Ministers of Culture of EU Member States (2006), which aimed at strengthening European identity and preserving heritage. A few years later, Decision 1194/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council, adopted on 16 November 2011, established the EHL as an official EU action and defined the criteria for site selection.

The exact budget available for this action is not known. The figure of EUR 1 350 000 appeared in the speech of Polish MEP Marek Henryk Migalski during the parliamentary debate on the report drawn by Chrysoula Paliadeli, on behalf of the Committee on Culture and Education:

> It seems to me that the initiative we are currently discussing is building something that does not exist: 'Europeanism' or some kind of artificial creation that is a pawn in a political game (...) I find that the European Heritage Label is an entity that is being multiplied more than necessary. I will not mention the huge question mark that hangs over the question of how the mark will be awarded and withdrawn. I will not mention that the initiative will cost European taxpayers EUR 1 350 000. My question is of a fundamental nature: why are we doing this? Do we really need to build something that is not Europeanity but only Europeanism? (Migaksly, 16/12/2010).

Unlike the UNESCO World Heritage List, which highlights the universal cultural, historical and architectural value of sites such as the Historic Centre of Rome or the Great Wall of China, the EHL has a Eurocentric vision, centred on itself, its history and its unionist values. Despite its inclusive rhetoric and acceptance of diversity, EHL has a particular inclination towards self-referentiality. Thus, among the EHL sites are the European Quarter in Strasbourg; the Schengen Village; the Alcide de Gasperi House-Museum (Treviso); the Robert Schuman

House (Scy-Chazelles); the Maastricht Treaty; Ventotene Island, the site of Altiero Spinelli's famous manifesto. To these "places of memory" are added, in contrast, cemeteries, camps and prisons: the Westrbork camp, the cemetery in Luzna-Pustki, the place of commemoration in Lambinowice, the Natzweiller camp, the Sighet Memorial. As in a play of light and shadow, the traumatic memories of world wars, totalitarianism and the Holocaust are contrasted with the European Union's project for peace and human rights and the figures of its founding fathers. A simplified version of the past, written from the edulcorated perspective of the present.

What is being offered to these sites through the EHL action? Visibility (according to programmatic documents). A logo, a website, a poster, a presentation brochure (not direct funds). That is, the typical elements of a marketing campaign focused on a target group – young people. The EHL action envisages their involvement in the context of school visits, summer schools, conferences, exhibitions with the aim of telling a story, a narrative that supports the idea of European identity and the ideological scaffolding of the European Union.

How are these sites selected? In two phases. Every two years, after the national pre-selection, a jury (which has remained anonymous for a long time) of 13 heritage experts (appointed by the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission and the Committee of the Regions) assesses the Member States' applications and makes its recommendations for the award of the EHL label. Once awarded, another (national and anonymous) committee periodically monitors the fulfilment of the criteria every four years. Not one name, not one face, not one voice publicly owns up to the selection and monitoring process. Therefore, beyond the symbolic visibility of the EHL logo, institutional opacity may undermine legitimacy.

Three of the 67 heritage sites that bear the EHL emblem are in Romania: The Memorial to the Victims of Communism in Sighet; The Palace of the European Commission of the Danube; The Romanian Athenaeum in Bucharest. According to the EHL, such disparate narrative threads, from Romania and from other Member States, weave themselves into the narrative of the European Union. Even if this were true, the visibility of EHL action and, consequently, its effects are low (Čeginskas, 2019). While it cannot be said that such sites have no educational or tourism potential, EHL has failed to capture the attention of the media and the public. And if a fact has no emotional impact, it is not destined to create cohesion or to persist in the collective memory. It would be naive to think that applying such labels could compensate or at least mitigate the existing polarizations between EU member states, between sovereigntists and federalists, or the rift between the Eurocrats and the citizens of the member states of EU. So, EHL remains what it is, another expression of the European Union's strategy of cultural diplomacy, of *soft power.* Symbolic, without reverberations and, above all, without creative virtues in terms of European identity.

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