A COMMUNITY OF FATE: GROWING EUROPEAN IDENTITY IN TIMES OF POLYCRISIS

Exploring Long-Term Trends of European Identity Across the European Member States

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EUDENTIFY

Project information

EUDENTIFY is a research project at the University of Amsterdam funded by a VIDI grant of the Dutch Research Council (NWO). The project is led by Prof. Dr. Theresa Kuhn, and the project team further consists of post-doc Dr. Armin Seimel, PhD student Isabela Zeberio Aguerrevere, and research assistant John Michaelis.

The project examines the dynamic relationship between EU institution building and collective identity change in the European Union. EUDENTIFY introduces a novel measure of European identity, enabling the study of identity across Europe since the 1980s. It provides both theoretical and empirical insights into how EU institution building and collective identity interact, revealing the circumstances under which they constrain or strengthen each other.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Introducing a new measure of European identity

Has European integration left its mark on collective identities? Can we speak of a shared identity among European citizens? If so, how has it developed across Europe, and in response to major political events and the "polycrises" of the past two decades?

The aim of this report is to answer these questions and to highlight the descriptive trends discovered by a novel measure of European identity, built in the context of the EUDENTIFY Project. This tool was created to enable researchers to track European identity across time and across countries with a consistent measure.

Most existing research on European identity is limited to analyses of a single survey question of European identity used in Eurobarometer surveys: self-identification as (also) European or (only) national. This is problematic for two reasons: First, this is a somewhat crude measure of a multidimensional phenomenon and therefore has only limited reliability. Secondly, this question was only fielded from 1992 onwards and with significant gaps across time and countries.

By combining various representative survey sources from 34 countries over a period of 41 years using advanced statistical modelling (Bayesian latent trait modelling), we create a "*poll of polls*": a cross-country comparable measure that pools the information from all surveys, countries, and years and that accounts for differences in questions such as difficulty as well as translation[1].

This new measure therefore allows an entirely new longitudinal perspective on European identity. The analyses made possible by this novel perspective have the potential to be a significant step forward in our understanding of the development of European identity. It lays the groundwork for future research to examine its causes and its consequences for European politics and society.

1.2 Theoretical Background

In this report, we showcase the long-term trends of European identity across European nations.

We define European identity as a collective identity involving people's self-understanding of being a member of a larger European community and the emotional weight linked to this membership.[2] This European identity has a *cognitive dimension*, relating to whether people see themselves as members of that collective (*identification as European*), an *emotional dimension*, relating to attachment and feelings associated with being a member of this group (*identifying with Europe*), and an *evaluative dimension,* relating to one's judgments and evaluations of their own and other's groups. While our analysis focuses on European Union (EU) countries, this identity is not necessarily specific to the EU, but may relate to Europe as a whole.

Furthermore, people can identify with multiple political entities at the same time,[3] hence European identity does not necessarily replace national identity,[4] and many people see themselves as European in addition to their national identity.[5]

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[1] For more details about the measure, such as which surveys were included and for which countries we have available data, please consult our website (www.eudentify.eu). There you can also find an interactive map.

[2] This follows the definition of social identity by Tajfel (1974).
[3] Medrano & Gutiérrez (2001)
[4] Huddy & Del Ponte (2019)
[5] Risse (2015)

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When we talk about what it means to be European, it is also important to think about the EU as it is the main way in which Europeans act collectively. Some people think that being part of the EU will make people feel more like they belong to Europe, while others think identity politics might hinder European nations from working together.[6] But most would agree that how people feel about being European and European integration are connected.

To illustrate, with the Treaty of Maastricht, the topic of an integrated Europe became a highly politicized issue. Whether people see themselves as belonging to their national community or (also) to Europe has become central to this divide.[7] This is because EU matters have become more important since the Treaty of Maastricht, as European integration now has more noticeable effects on how people live.

Furthermore, moments of crisis in Europe may serve as an opportunity to bring its countries closer together and to build the infrastructure to respond to similar problems collectively better in the future. Identity, and economic preferences play big roles in determining public opinion regarding whether these problems should indeed be tackled by a collective Europe.[8] And when countries fail to agree on how to solve crucial problems together, it might actually make people feel frustrated and less European.

1.3 What to expect in this report

This report is structured in the following way:

First, we briefly compare how our new measure of European identity compares with another country-level measure of public attitudes towards the EU also using a Bayesian model. By comparing them over time, we also highlight notable crises and events that Europe faced in each figure.

Then, we explore the trends in European identity for a set of countries in the EU-15, i.e., countries that were part of the EU before 2004.[9] We do so by visualising levels of European identity in countries grouped by approximate geographical location: Northern, Western, Southern Europe, and the British Isles. For each cluster, we provide a brief descriptive analysis of the trends observed.

Third, we examine the trends observed in central and eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004 and onwards. Here we group by the Baltic region, as well as Central European and South-Eastern European region.

Lastly, we conclude the report by synthesizing the general trends observed across Europe. Our main finding is that European identity has increased throughout the past decade, despite the major crises that Europe has been through. To some degree, there seems to exist a "community of fate". Also, increased politicisation involving the rise of nationalist, Eurosceptic parties, may not be an issue of collective identities but likely that of new parties – challenging existing party structures across the EU – picking up the sceptics.

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[6] Kuhn (2019)
[7] Hooghe & Marks (2009)
[8] Nicoli (2018)

[9] For the sake of clarity, not all European countries for which there is data will be depicted and discussed.

2 Comparing measures: EU support and European identity

We contrast the trend of our measure of European identity with EU support, i.e. endorsement of the EU, its institutions and policies, which is more rational and interest-led[10], By doing so, we aim to show the notable differences between the two concepts and the added value of analysing European identity as a phenomenon that is related to EU support.

EU support and European identity are clearly related, yet they are conceptually different. In other words, a citizen might hold European identity but nonetheless be sceptical about European integration, or the direction that the EU is currently heading. In turn, some people might generally support some level of European cooperation for instrumental reasons but might not feel European.

Figure 1 shows our measure of European identity compared to a measure of EU support put forward by Scotto di Vettimo[11] in the Netherlands. Both measures use Bayesian models to create cross-country comparisons of each respective concept.

We can observe in Figure 1 that for most of the observed time period European identity has a substantially lower level than EU support. However, from 1990 until the early 2000s both measures follow a similar trajectory in which we can observe a subtle decrease both in EU support and our measure of identity. This decrease is in line with the widespread observation of the increase in public euroscepticim in the wake of the Maastricht treaty that marked a shift from 'permissive consensus' to the 'constraining dissensus' in public opinion regarding further European integration.[12]

From 2004 onwards this parallel trend ends and while EU support remains on a subtle downward trajectory, European identity increases substantially over time until it exceeds the level of European support.

Figure 1: EU support compared to European identity in the Netherlands
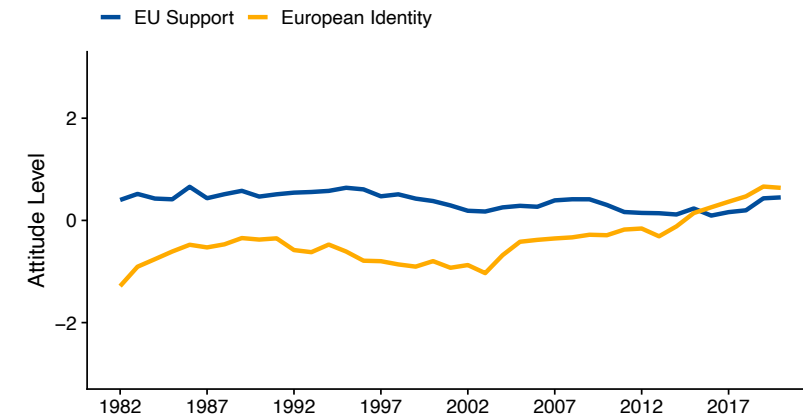
Note: The y-axis is scaled in standard deviations from the overall average across all countries and years. For easier comparison, the measure of EU support was rescaled to match our measure of European identity.

To interpret these different trends, it is essential to understand that EU support and European identity reflect fundamentally different forms of political orientations. Easton describes these different

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[10] De Vries (2018)
[11] di Vettimo (2022)

[12] Eichenberg & Dalton (2007); Hooghe & Marks (2009)

forms of support as diffuse and specific types.[13] Here, *specific* support refers to a form of support that is contingent upon the short-term performance and outputs of a political regime. In contrast, *diffuse* support is a more foundational type of support that pertains to the norms and values a regime embodies. In the context of the EU, these concepts manifest as EU support and European identity: EU support is influenced by the performance and outputs of the EU, while European identity reflects endorsement of the norms and values that the EU and, more broadly, cooperation in Europe represent.

Consequently, the rise in European identity could indicate that the EU is assuming a larger role in people's lives, leading to broader identification with and adoption of European and EU values. This heightened relevance is likely to prompt more rigorous scrutiny of EU policies and generally elevate the debate over EU issues in the public arena. Increased awareness of European politics may also contribute to heightened polarization and contestation, especially on critical issues. This dynamic could be a fundamental factor in the concurrent increase in European identity and the growing political support for Eurosceptic parties.

Socialization and generational replacement might also play a notable role. Over the past decade, a new generation has come of age that has never known a Europe with internal borders and a Europe without the EU.

3 European identity trends in Western, Southern, and Northern Europe

3.1 Western Europe

Overall, Figure 2 shows a positive trend in European identity across the four Western European countries. What stands out is a small peak in European identity, followed by a sharp decline in the mid 1990s following the Treaty of Maastricht (1992). Up to that point, France shows moderate and Belgium and the Netherlands even substantial increases in identity.

This being said, **Germany** shows a strong and steady decline in European identity from the earliest available data until the late 1990s. Notably, the pattern around the period of German reunification around 1990 shows no unique trend compared to the other countries in this group. Since the late 1990s, the country displays the largest growth in European identity, with notable stagnation and some decline most recently.

Similar growth in European identity can be observed in **Belgium** and the **Netherlands**. Belgium's drop in European identity following Maastricht, as well as its lift in the late 1990s and mirrors the pattern in Germany.

The Netherlands displayed the lowest level of European identity amongst this group until 2017. Until 2004, the country's pattern mirrored the one of France. Since then, levels have strongly increased, similar to Belgium and Germany.

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[13] Easton (1965)

France stands out from this group of countries as it shows the smallest growth in European identity. It is especially noteworthy because France has the highest level of European identity from the mid 1980s to the early 2000s, but today displays the lowest level among the four countries depicted here. Often considered as one of the two pillars of the EU, together with Germany, it is striking that identification with Europe remains only average in France.

Figure 2: European identity in Western Europe
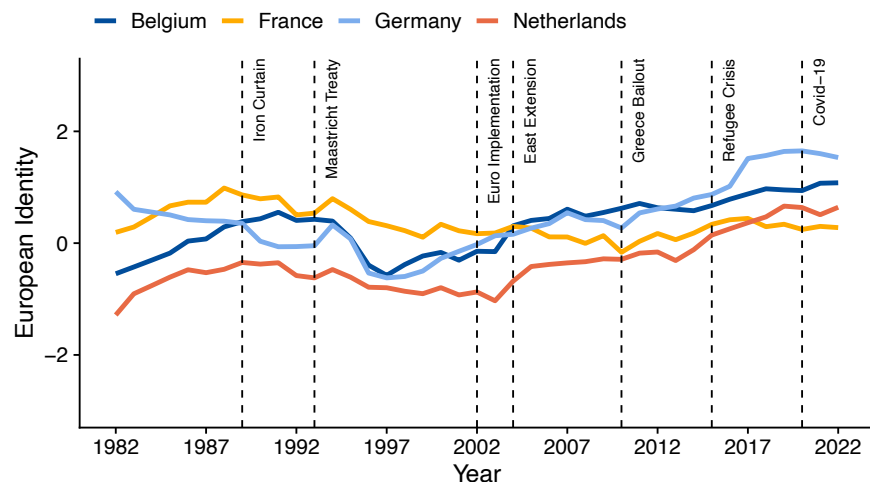
Note: European identity on the y-axis is scaled in standard deviations from the overall average across all countries and years. The dotted lines highlight key events in Europe: The fall of the Iron Curtain, the Treaty of Maastricht, the implementation of the single currency, EU eastern enlargement, the first Greek bailout package, the humanitarian crisis surrounding the surge in refugees, and the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key observations: In highlighting the key events that built and threatened European cohesion over the past 40 years, what stands out is that European identity was at only moderate levels in four out of the 12 founding EU countries during the most important treaty for European integration (the Treaty of Maastricht) and was even lower during the introduction of the Euro. The European debt crisis associated with the single currency did not coincide with major shifts in European identity and neither did the humanitarian crisis surrounding the surge in refugees in 2015, or Covid-19.

3.2 Southern Europe

The pattern of European identity in the southern European countries depicted in Figure 3 is less clear than in Western Europe. While all four countries start off with a similarly average level of European identity, the trends for each country strongly diverge. Both Greece and Italy show little or no overall increase in European identity over the course of 40 years, while citizens in Portugal and Spain increasingly identify as European.

Italy, as one of the founding members of the European Community, shows a steady incline in European identity until the mid 1990s. However, Italians identification with Europe has been characterised by a strong negative trend following the introduction of the Euro. Notably, this downward trend in European identification precedes the Eastern enlargement in 2004. Perhaps surprisingly, there has been a significant increase in European identity again following the humanitarian crisis surrounding the surge in refugees in 2015,

Greece stands out as a country with a lower level of European identification over the past 30 years. Greeks held moderate levels of European identity for much of the 1980s with even an upward trend just before the 1990s. During the early 1990s, identification with Europe plummeted in Greece, reaching its low point in 1996. Since then, European identity has gradually increased, but still has not reached its peak from the late 1980s.

Both **Spain** and **Portugal** joined the European Community in 1986 to solidify their young democracies, and early data suggests that citizens in both countries moderately identified as European when they joined. Trends in both countries follow similar patterns with European identity decreasing in both countries following the Treaty of Maastricht, up until 1996, but much more strongly so in Portugal than it did in Spain. European identity subsequently experienced a striking boost in both Portugal and Spain. However, the greater drop in identity in Portugal and the greater subsequent increase in Spain underlie the divergence between the two countries heading into the 2000s. Today, both countries show levels of European identification that are above average, due to strong increases in the 2010s.

Figure 3: European identity in Southern Europe
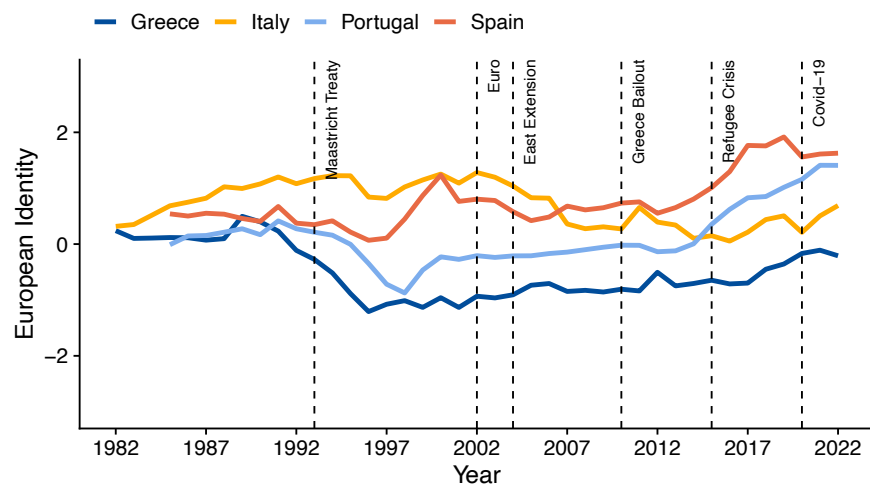
Note: European identity on the y-axis is scaled in standard deviations from the overall average across all countries and years. The dotted lines highlight key events in Europe: The Treaty of Maastricht, the implementation of the single currency, EU eastern enlargement, the first Greek bailout package,

the humanitarian crisis surrounding the surge in refugees, and the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key observations: Notably, all these countries depicted here were highly affected by the European debt crisis, and Greece, Spain and Portugal were forced to implement significant and contentious austerity measures. While that was the source of a lot of friction at the time across EU member states, European identity increased in the aftermath of those measures. The Covid-19 pandemic coincides with significant dips in European identity in Italy and Spain, but not in Greece and Portugal.

3.3 Northern Europe

The overall trend of European identification in northern European countries in Figure 4 is strikingly positive. However, after decades of rising levels of European identity, it remains just about average in those Nordic countries, compared to the other countries over time. What stands out for these countries is their low level of European identity prior to the 2000s when they joined the EU.

Denmark as an early member of the European Community shows a steady incline in European identity until the 1990s. European identity levels regress during the mid-1990s at a time when there was significant social and political unrest in Denmark surrounding the topic of immigration and refugees. Notably, European identity reaches a peak in 2002, but falls off following the implementation of the single currency, which it had decided to opt out of in 2000. European identity remains stagnant until the mid-2010s but has increased in recent years despite major events such as the humanitarian crisis surrounding the surge in refugees in 2015 and Covid-19, reaching its highest level in 2022.

Finland submitted its application for EU membership in 1992 and successfully joined the EU in 1995. However, that period marked by a decline in European identity to below-average levels. European identity remained stagnant until the mid-2000s and has since risen to slightly above-average levels. Remarkably, European identity experienced a significant upsurge following the European debt crisis, only to decline again during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 4: European identity in Northern Europe
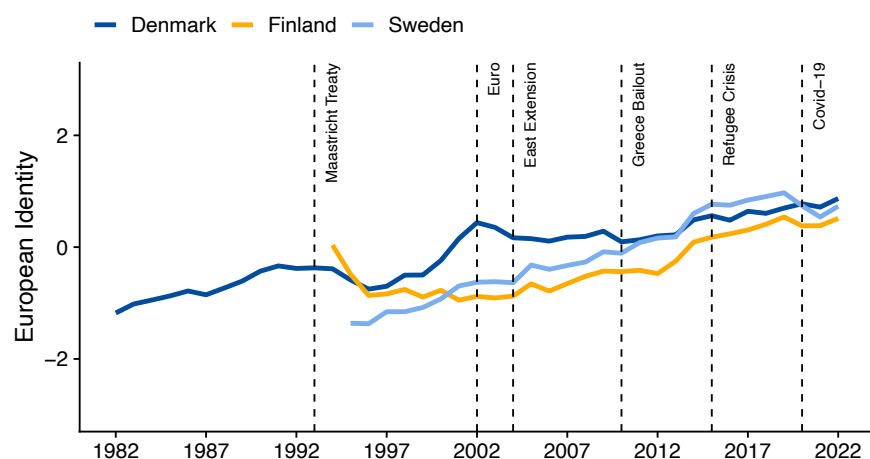
Note: European identity on the y-axis is scaled in standard deviations from the overall average across all countries and years. The dotted lines highlight key events in Europe: The Treaty of Maastricht, the implementation of the single currency, EU eastern enlargement, the first Greek bailout package, the humanitarian crisis surrounding the surge in refugees, and the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sweden stands out among the Nordic EU countries for experiencing the largest increase in European identity among the Nordic EU countries. Its trend line is characterized by a remarkably steady increase since its data is available. This positive trend only reverses with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Surprisingly, the humanitarian crisis triggered by the surge in refugees in 2015, during which Sweden provided refuge to a substantial number of asylum seekers, and amidst considerable contentious discourse across Europe regarding solidarity, had minimal impact on European identification in Sweden.

Key observations: Finland is the only country among the Nordic countries in this group that is a member of the Eurozone, while also having the lowest level of European identity. Denmark, however, rejected the adoption of the Euro, which reflected signification public opposition at the time, despite significantly higher levels of European identification amongst the population. European identity therefore may not be equivalent to public support for increased European integration.

3.4 British Isles

European identity trends in **Ireland** and the **United Kingdom** (UK) are remarkably similar up until the Brexit referendum. The notable difference is that European identification is consistently much higher in Ireland than in the UK. Both countries experience a peak in European identification during the mid-90s following the Treaty of Maastricht. After some increases in the early 2000s, the trend becomes again negative following the European enlargement in 2004, however, more so in Ireland than in the UK.

In Ireland, European identity is at below average levels following the Eastern extension in 2004 and the economic crisis the country experienced from 2008 to 2013. However, coinciding with its

economy's upswing, European identity follows a strong positive trend, from 2013 until 2019 when the UK officially left the European Union and the Covid-19 pandemic hit in the following year. During that period, European identity rose by about two standard deviations, from below average, compared to the other countries over time, to one of the highest levels across the EU.

Figure 3: European identity in the British Isles
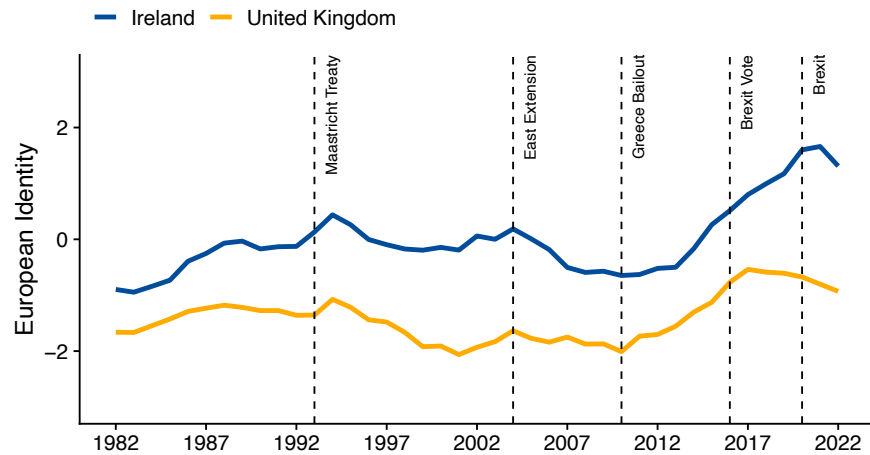
Note: European identity on the y-axis is scaled in standard deviations from the overall average across all countries and years. The dotted lines highlight key events in Europe: The Treaty of Maastricht, the implementation of the single currency, EU eastern enlargement, the first Greek bailout package, the Brexit vote, and when Brexit became official.

[14] Hobolt (2016)
[15] Barwick (2021)

The UK also sees a positive trend in European identity but between 2010 and 2017. This is remarkable because at the time of the Brexit referendum, European identity was at an all-time high in the UK.

While the UK is the country with the lowest level of European identity of all EU countries, Brexit may not necessarily be a product of a general lack of collective European identity. In fact, at the time of Brexit, Greece has similar (low) levels of European identity. Instead, it appears to be the product of increased politicisation and Eurosceptic agents in the UK activating existing anti-EU sentiment.

Indeed, the presence of Euroscepticism within the British electorate has been a consistent feature, with the UK standing out as the most Eurosceptic nation in the EU.[14] Unlike in many other European countries where European identity complements national identity, in Great Britain, there exists a perception of exclusivity and competition between national and European identities.[15] This requires Britons to make a choice between the two and excludes feelings of belonging to both. Consequently, British identity may inherently lean towards Euroscepticism. This is very much reflected in who voted for Brexit, with those who identify as English being much more likely to have voted "leave".[16]

Since 2017, following the vote on Brexit, the positive trend in the UK has again become negative. One plausible interpretation of this shift is that the decision for British identity over European identity has become the clearer choice following the Brexit referendum.

Key observations: What stands out is how the otherwise very much parallel trends in Ireland and the UK, diverge following the UK's decision to leave the EU. This points at the importance shared institutions and the conscious decision to participate in those may have for a collective European identity.
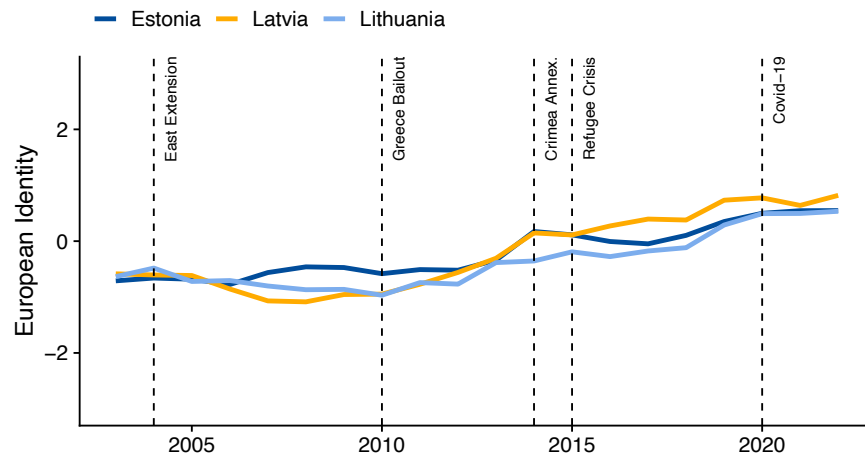
[16] Kuhn (2019)

4 European identity trends in the Baltic States, Central, and South-Eastern Europe

4.1 Baltic states

Figure 4: European identity in the Baltic states

Note: European identity on the y-axis is scaled in standard deviations from the overall average across all countries and years. The dotted lines highlight key events in Europe: The EU eastern enlargement, the first Greek bailout package, the Russian annexation of Crimea, humanitarian crisis surrounding the surge in refugees, and the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Overall, since the Baltic states joined the EU in 2004, European identity has increased from below average to above average for all three states: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. What stands out is that European identity develops remarkably similar across the Baltic region, since data became first available for these countries.

Across all three countries, levels of European identity remain somewhat stable until 2010, after which it starts to notably increase. European identity in the Baltics has been increasing throughout the 2010s and began to stagnate in 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the countries in Figure 4 have stabilized at an above-average level.

4.2 Central Europe

What stands out is that the overall trend of European identification in central European countries is strikingly positive, particularly in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Given the Eurosceptic characterization of Hungary and (until recently) Poland, this may perhaps be unexpected. In 2003, when data is first available, European identification is at similar levels across all countries in the region and diverges from 2007 onward.

When **Hungary** joined the EU, European identification was at just below average but the lowest of this cluster of countries. Immediately following its EU membership, however, it surges to above average levels until 2007, after which it trends negative until 2012, particularly following the first Greek bailout package. Since then, Hungarians are increasingly identifying as Europeans, making it the country with the highest level of European identification in this country cluster (closely followed by Poland). The Russian annexation of Crimea coincides with a strong increase. Only since the Covid-19 pandemic, European identity levels in Hungary has become stagnant.

Figure 5: European identity in Central Europe
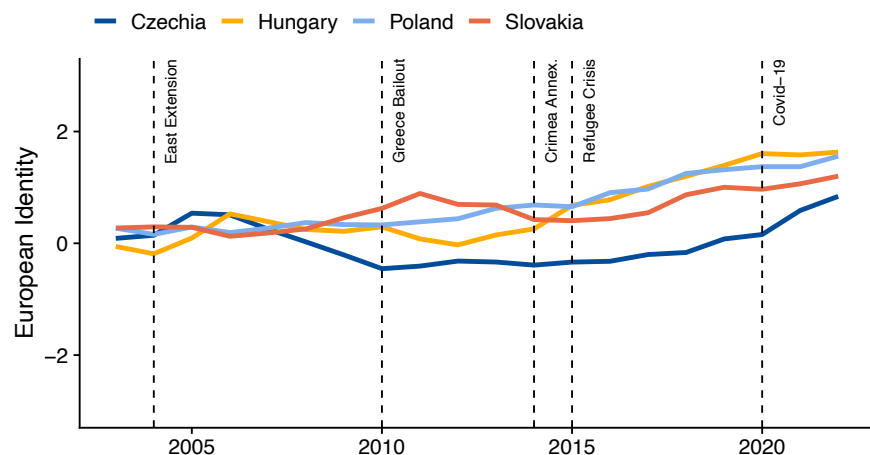
Note: European identity on the y-axis is scaled in standard deviations from the overall average across all countries and years. The dotted lines highlight key events: the EU eastern enlargement, the first Greek bailout package, the Russian annexation of Crimea, the Refugee Crisis, and the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Poland shows a remarkably stable positive trend ever since data first becomes available. Since the country joined the EU in 2004, European identification never reached below-average levels. While the trend stays stagnant for the first nine years of its EU membership, it starts increasing in the early 2010s, and does so quite substantially between 2015 and 2018. Leading up to and following the Covid-19 pandemic the of European identity trend becomes somewhat stagnant again.

Czechia stands out from this group of countries with the lowest levels of European identification for much of the period depicted in Figure 5. Key to Czechia's European identity trend diverging from

the other countries is a drop to below-average levels in the late 2000s. From 2010 to 2018, this trend stays rather stagnant and only since 2018, it has increased. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, European identification has increased quite substantially to just above average levels.

In **Slovakia**, European identification increases throughout the 2000s and reaches a peak in 2011 during the Eurozone crisis. Following that, the trend turns negative until 2014 and remains stagnant at about average levels of European identity. Since 2017, European identification has been rising again, including in the two years following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key observations: What stands out when comparing the trendlines in Figure 5 is that the two Eurozone countries, Slovakia, and Hungary both experience a dip in European identification in the period following the first Greek bailout package, while there is no such pattern in the Poland and Czechia, which have their own currency.

There is a strong divergence in European identification between Czechs and Slovaks in the 2000s, with Slovaks generally identifying more strongly with Europe than Czechs. While these two countries share a history of spending much of the 20th century in a single state, this further highlights the complex interplay of shared history and distinct cultural identities within Central Europe.

Furthermore, while Euroscepticism is not unique to Hungary and Poland, their politics were dominated by nationalist forces, championing for less European integration, for much of the 2010s. Therefore, it is it is notable, and perhaps unexpected, that citizens in both countries show constant levels of above-average European identification, and that levels have increased substantially since 2010. The strong politicization of EU issues in those countries might be partially responsible for some of the increases in European identification in that period.

4.3 South-Eastern Europe

Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia are the most recent countries to join the EU, with the first two joining in 2007 and Croatia becoming a member in 2013. Overall, Figure 6 shows little increase in European identification over time in these countries.

Figure 6: European identity in South-Eastern Europe
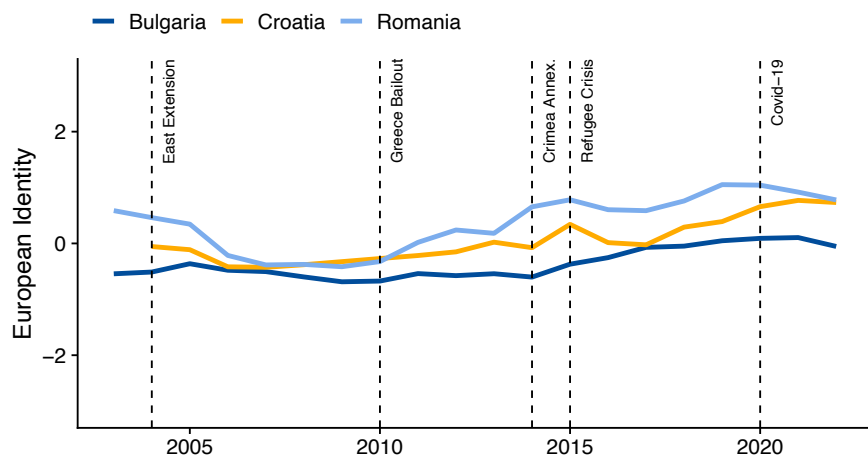
Note: European identity on the y-axis is scaled in standard deviations from the overall average across all countries and years. The dotted lines highlight key events: the EU eastern enlargement, the first Greek bailout package, the Russian annexation of Crimea, the Refugee Crisis, and the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

When **Bulgaria** joined the EU in 2007, European identification was just below average, and slightly trending downwards between 2005 and 2010. From 2010 to 2014, that trendline was stagnant, but increases in 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea. Leading up to 2020, European identification in Bulgaria then stagnates again, and there was a notable drop in the second year following the Covid-19 pandemic.

When first recorded in 2004, European identification in **Romanians** is above average. However, by the time it joined the EU in 2007, levels significantly dropped too just below average. European identity levels stay below average until 2010, after it increases substantially until 2015. The following dip is not substantial, and European identification remains above average into 2020. Most recently, it has dropped again, following the Covid-19 pandemic.

European identity in **Croatia** is notable as it shows a subtle positive trend in European identification from 2006 until 2013, before it joined the EU. However, this increase was small and European identity levels were average when Croatia became a member. There was a small peak in 2015 around the refugee crisis, when refugees travelled via the Balkan route through Croatia into central and western Europe. Since 2017, European identification has increased substantially again.

Key observations: What stands out is that levels of European identification are similar across all three countries, even though Croatia joined the EU six years after Bulgaria and Romania. Thus, it is notable that despite having shared institutions and receiving EU funding six years prior to Croatia, European identification in Romania and Bulgaria does not strongly diverge from that of Croatia.

5 Conclusion

5.1 General Trends and Take-Aways

We show that while European identity and EU support are linked concepts, they are distinct. The divergence in recent years between European identity and EU support may be reflective of the increased politicization of European integration across the EU that may affect support differently than identification. In Central Europe, some of the significant increases in European identity may even be due to this amplified politicisation and its underlying causes.

How has European identity developed across Europe, and can we speak of a shared identity among European citizens?

The most notable finding in this report is that European identity is stronger than one might think. That is despite the "polycrises" across the past decades, which has been argued to fracture the European political system across multiple, simultaneous rifts.[17]

We show that notwithstanding significant challenges, such as the European debt crisis, refugee crisis, and Brexit, European identity has shown a consistent increase throughout the past decades. While these events had varying impacts on European identity across different countries, they did not consistently lead to significant shifts in overall sentiment. This resilience, to some extent, suggests the presence of a shared "community of fate", wherein despite challenges, the collective identity of Europeans continues to strengthen over time. It might very well be that the experience of these crises shows Europeans that they are "in this together".

While this suggests a growing sense of belonging and cohesion among European citizens, the increase over time strongly varies across different regions of Europe. Northern and Western European countries exhibit a positive trend in European identity, while Southern and Central European countries show more diverse patterns. Geography and location in Europe might therefore play a significant role in individual's identification with Europe.

Is European identity needed for European integration?

The trends examined in this report suggest that important steps towards European integration were taken without strong European identity among the population, with most country populations at moderate or below average levels of identification during key events European integration, such as joining the EU or the Eurozone. However, the case of Brexit points toward the significance of collective identities for European integration. Furthermore, factors such as electoral opportunities, mobilisation of elites, and political actors emphasising utilitarian benefits are likely to be additional factors that are highly relevant.

Has European integration left its mark on collective identities?

EU membership may have a generally positive effect on European identity over time, although that evidence is mixed too. The case of Brexit underscores the significance of shared institutions, and the public willingness to participate in them, may have for a collective European identity, particularly in the British Isles. However, in South-Eastern Europe, the impact of EU membership on European identity seems less pronounced. Given the slow growth of European identity overall, some of this growth may be in part due to generational replacement.

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[17] Zeitlin et al., (2019)

5.2 Policy recommendations

With the 2024 European Parliamentary elections looming, many forecasts expect a right-ward shift in which nationalist, Eurosceptic parties stand to gain. Indeed, Europe has witnessed the rise of nationalist and Eurosceptic parties, and events like Brexit, but this report shows that this does not correspond to a decline in European identity. Rather, it could be attributed to the emergence of a new level of awareness of European issues – challenging existing party structures – that are mobilizing Eurosceptic citizens.

In fact, European identity is on the rise across the continent. Why are policy makers well-advised to continue to strengthen it? As a form of support for the core values and norms of the EU, a European identity can serve as a reservoir of legitimacy also in crisis times, or when policy makers must take unpopular, yet necessary decisions.

Furthermore, European identity is linked to attitudes that are beneficial for European politics. Research has shown that people who identify as Europeans are less inclined to vote for populist parties, and more likely to show solidarity towards other Europeans.[18]

A key reason for the prevalence of Eurosceptics may be their ability to effectively mobilize those sceptical of European politics, while EU supporters are often dispersed among established parties. This dynamic was notably evident in Germany, where revelations about the Eurosceptic party, the AfD, sparked widespread protests and mobilized people across party lines. Events like Brexit underscore the significant consequences of failing to mobilize this reservoir of support for a united Europe. Given challenges such as the global climate crisis and an active war in Europe, mobilizing this fundamental form of support is more crucial than ever to preserve the EU and its freedoms.

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[18] Bauhr & Charron (2020); Nicoli et al. (2020); Verhaegen (2018)

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