Quietly Sprouting: A European Identity

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Recent debate over the ratification of the EU constitution indicates that the political unification of Europe may lag behind its cultural, educational, and economic unification. Today, many Europeans, from countries far in the west to newly-admitted EU member states in the east, admit to feeling more "European" than any distinct nationality. While strong associations with a home country still exist, it is not uncommon to meet individuals who work in two countries, travel extensively to others, and speak three or four different languages. Students are crisscrossing the continent, and employers are eager to capitalize on the new multicultural, cosmopolitan workforce. While regional obstinacies – divisions over the Iraq war and France's threatened "no" to the EU constitution – are indeed barriers to a smooth transition from nation to continent, changes are coming. In the next decades, the social fabric of Europe may have changed significantly, as leaders produced in this generation of hybrid Europeanism ascend to governing control.

BRUSSELS Jorgo Riss was born and raised in Germany: He has a weakness for bratwurst and a thoroughly Germanic seriousness about issues like solar power. But he also has an Italian casualness about punctuality and loves his 5 o'clock tea, a habit he picked up in London.

"I feel European rather than German," said Riss, 34, who has lived in five European countries, speaks five languages and now runs Greenpeace's office in Brussels. "I feel at home anywhere in Europe."

A year after 10 new members joined the European Union, euroskepticism and doubts about the new European constitution may be dominating headlines. But beyond politics and institutional battles, the everyday reality of Europe's open borders is quietly forging a European identity.

A growing number of young Europeans like Riss study, work and date across the Continent. Unlike their parents, who grew up within the confines of nationhood, they are multilingual and multicultural.

Most of the EU citizens who say they feel "European" still rank their national identity higher than their European one, opinion polls show. But among those aged 21 to 35, almost a third say they feel more European than German, French or Italian, according to a survey by Time magazine in 2001.

Stefan Wolff, a professor of political science at the University of Bath, in England, calls them the "Erasmus generation," after the EU's university exchange program. Over the last 18 years, Erasmus has allowed 1.2 million young people to study abroad within Europe during their university years.

When this generation takes the reins in coming decades, both in Brussels and in national capitals, it could produce a profound cultural shift, he says.

"For the first time in history, we're seeing the seeds of a truly European identity," Wolff said.

"Give it 15, 20 or 25 years, and Europe will be run by leaders with a completely different socialization from those of today," he added. "I'm quite optimistic that in the future there will be less national wrangling, less Brussels-bashing and more unity in EU policy making - even if that is hard to picture today."

To be sure, Europeans have been crossing borders for centuries. From the complex intermarriages of monarchs to artists and writers moving among coffeehouses in Paris, Vienna and Prague, political calculation and cultural exchange have formed a broad sense of common heritage on the Continent.

But the acceleration and breadth of mobility over the past decade are unprecedented. At its heart lies a combination of legal and economic factors.

The advent of a single European market, implemented between 1985 and 1992, enabled goods and people to move more freely across borders in the EU. Since then, the number of Europeans gaining degrees outside their country of origin has surged, and many of them stay on at least temporarily to work in their new home.

Erasmus, which was set up in 1987 in preparation for the single market, began with 3,000 students and last year handed out almost 136,000 grants. Students from the 10 new member countries, which are mainly East European, started taking part in Erasmus in 1997, before their countries' accession. When they joined the Union last May, their participation rose by a third, to about 20,000.

An international education is by now a must-have for talented young people, and European companies have made the whole Continent their roaming ground. They want cosmopolitan, mobile and multilingual staff.

European governments, networking with each other in most areas of policy, are increasingly looking for that international dimension. At Greenpeace in Brussels, Riss has 11 co-workers of different nationalities. One of his hiring conditions is that they speak a minimum of three languages, although most speak four, he says.

Jan Figel, the EU's commissioner for education, training, culture and multilingualism, says it is precisely the cultural diversity demanded of young Europeans today that is helping to give them a common identity.

"They are not asked to give up their national or regional identity - they are asked to go beyond it, and that it what pulls them closer together," said Figel, whose department is in charge of Erasmus. "We are creating a community in which diversity is not a problem but a characteristic. It is an integral part of feeling European."

According to a poll conducted by the European Commission in all 25 member states last year, more than two-thirds of respondents say they feel "attached" to Europe. Fifty-seven percent see their identity as having a "European dimension" in the near future, up five percentage points from 1999, while 41 percent say their identity remains entirely national.

So what is this somewhat woolly notion of feeling European? What is the common denominator between, say, an Irish villager and a Pole living near the Ukrainian border?

Unlike a national or regional identity, strongly based on geography and language, being European appears for most people to be a set of broadly shared values. One such value would be democracy, which most Europeans associate with a social safety net, according to periodic opinion polls conducted by the commission. Quality of life ranks high on their list of priorities, as do environmental concerns and a reluctance to use military means to achieve political goals.

There are still sharp differences of opinion within the EU, of course. France is famously reluctant to scale back its generous benefits and has lobbied hard for harmonizing taxes across the Union, while Britain and some of the new East European members want more economic liberalization.

But, argues Jeremy Rifkin, who was an adviser to Romano Prodi when he was president of the European Commission, few in Europe question the basic premise of a welfare state in the way many more Americans would. "There is now something like a European public opinion on a lot of issues," said Rifkin, author of "The European Dream."

Perhaps the most striking example of such convergence is the wave of opposition to the Iraq war that swept across the Continent two years ago. Even if a number of governments - notably Britain, Italy, Poland and Spain - backed the United States on Iraq, European public opinion strongly opposed the invasion.

Two factors could set back what appears to be an emerging European identity in the decades ahead, Rifkin says. One is economic malaise in large swaths of the EU, amplified by stagnating population growth, and the other a widening disconnect between pro-European leaders and the wider public.

Some say trans-Atlantic tensions around the Iraq war may have strengthened a sense of unity in Europe. "George Bush has probably done more to forge a European identity than some of our own leaders," quipped one official in Brussels.

But others argue that the expansion of the EU is what is paving the way to a true European identity.

"In many ways enlargement has made Europe more European," said Figel, a Slovak. "Before last May, the European Union really was Western Europe."