

Political, cultural and linguistic challenges of European identity

Introduction

by Maria Stoicheva, Jean Monnet Chair

European identity has been the topic of a one-semester course with BA students in 2016, discussing the extent to which we identify with Europe and with the European Union and the conditionality of this identification. The course was held within the framework of the Jean Monnet Network European identity, culture, exchanges and multilingualism. In the fall semester of 2016-2017 the members of two Jean Monnet partner Universities made this topic the centre of their co-teaching and discussion with students in Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski –Prof. Zdzislaw Mach and Dr. Natasza Styczynska from the Institute of European Studies at the Jagiellonian University, Krakow and Prof. Maria Stoicheva, Jean Monnet Chair at Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski. This joint course has been a real Erasmus+ experience for students at the host University as Professors from partner universities taught it and also because Erasmus+ exchange students from European universities joined the course.

This course does not stand alone within the teaching activities of the Jean Monnet Network. It is a follow-up of an intensive course for doctorate students on the topic of European identity and the borders of Europe, held at the very beginning of the Network in 2014. It was also a co-teaching exercise between two Jean Monnet Chairs – Prof. Gilles Rouet and Prof. Maria Stoicheva. More than 20 doctorate students from Sofia University and exchange students from European universities took an active part in it. Some of them later joined in teaching bachelor courses and successfully defended their PhD theses.

The Jean Monnet Network - European Identity, Culture, Exchanges and Multilingualism- brings together Jean Monnet Chairs in the area of European identity, culture, European citizenship, exchanges and multilingualism. The core target group of the Network are young researchers (doctorate students, potential doctorate students and young researchers who have obtained a PhD degree in the past 5 years). The 2016 joint course involved current doctorate students and students from different disciplines in addition to the EU Studies department.

The rationale of the network is based on the need to seek synergies in teaching and research and in most of its planned activities the network addresses the objective of promoting innovation in teaching and research (e.g. collaborative teaching, cross-sector and multi-disciplinary studies and networking with institutions). The key academic staff come from various areas of study

(philosophy, EU Studies, education, linguistics, economics, sociology, political science, urban studies, etc.) willing to explore new dimensions in the cross section of approaches, findings and future research. The inter-institutional exchanges facilitated the collaborative approach to teaching the course. As result of the course we have registered increased capacity for teaching cooperation between the universities; awareness and increased interest of the students attending the joint course; the creation of platforms for exchanges of opinion that can involve and provoke public discussions on EU-related issues of active citizenship, filling the knowledge gap about how the EU functions and its impact on citizens' everyday life.

This special issue of the Rhetoric and Communication e-Journal presents two papers by researchers in the area of European identity. Prof. Gilles Rouet, Jean Monnet ad Personum Chair, delivered a lecture on Boundaries and Identities, which was later developed as a paper. Prof. Galina Sokolova was a special guest lecturer at the International doctorate summer school "The idea of Europe and its borders in the social sciences and the humanities" in 2015 talking on one of the main topics of the Jean Monnet Network – Europe: a view from outside. She is one of those researchers who were inspired by the topic and the activities of the Network and who have undertaken special research in the area, covering Europe as seen from India.

This special edition also includes a sample of essays developed by students who participated in the joint Jean Monnet course in 2016. The essays have been an opportunity to further inquire about topics that are mentioned in class but not developed, or to dedicate more attention to an aspect of the course of particular interest to different individuals. The students used it as a good way to demonstrate intellectual aptitude to critically discuss a problem, possibly for future research or for self-reflection. The topics discussed in the course papers varied according to individual preferences but were all related to the overall theme.

Students discussed national identities in the context of European integration and immigration, e.g. the British and the Other (immigration and multiculturalism), the crossroads of German identity in the evolution of the country's immigration policies, the formation of Albanian national identity. Regional identities provoked special interest, e.g. the Catalan case on personal identification and the Bavarian identity and how they remain strongly defined. Students presented their views on the Bulgarian ethnic model and Romani integration in contemporary Europe, and in particular on religious identity during the communist regime. Attitudes towards refugees figured as a reflection of current issues and challenges in public debates and political mobilisation. Significant Others for European identity formation provoked interest and led to very animated discussions. Aspects of political identification with the EU were raised and discussed in relation to voting patterns in Europe; the (lack of) participation in the 2014 European elections led to the question of whether it is a matter of political culture of a systematic failure. The importance of language for national identity formation and for integration policies has also drawn the attention of the students.

The oral presentations have been a further development, enabling us to gain new perspectives and better awareness of what we share and what we would like to share in the future of the European integration project. Part of the course has been delivered through videoconference; presentations are recorded and freely accessible on the Network websites.

This e-publication is a follow-up of the Special Issue of Rhetoric and Communications E-journal, Issue 15, January 2015 with publication of peer-reviewed PhD candidate articles as part of the Jean Monnet Network events programme.



Jean Monnet, Supporting Studies on European Integration

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