

Студентки дебюти
Student debuts

European Union, European Identity, European Gearbox

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Abstract: The essay includes research about terminology concerning the European Union and European Identity and the intersections between them. The assumption is that the ‘European Gearbox’ metaphor presents differences and new manifestations in different counties.

Keywords: European Union, European Identity, European Gearbox.

Introduction

The main thread of this text will be a cartoon that caught my attention while completing the course provided by the teacher on the Eurasia project platform, available at <https://eurasiaproject.eu/european-identity/>.

9. European Gearbox



This cartoon, available at <https://blog.cartoonmovement.com> [1] which captivates my interest, also proves to be a good topic of analysis of European reality in several areas. This cartoon provides a perspective of the European reality at the social, economic, identity, cultural, migratory and commercial levels.

I want to emphasize from the outset that the strongest economies of the EU are represented by the 1st forward gear, where the connection is more direct and practical. On the other hand, the countries with less developed EU economies are represented in the 2nd gear, in which the connection is more turbulent, with barriers of various kinds. In the opposite direction of the Union, the United Kingdom occupies the position at the back since it no longer believes in the success of the European project and has left the bloc.

In addition to the analysis of the cartoon and the knowledge gained from my studies and readings, this textual piece will be complemented with other information. For example, news or statistical data, academic studies, relevant textual excerpts from books and essays, as well as textual excerpts provided by the website of the European Union and its institutions.

Research

After the end of the Second World War and a recovery from the respective damages, the European continent, with the guidance of the USA, again became a prosperous space for economic, social and cultural development. More specifically, the Western side of the continent, since the world was divided into two antagonistic ideological and geographical blocks. Soviet socialism and Western capitalism gave rise to a bipolar distribution of power that lasted until 1990, when the Soviet bloc collapsed.

Meanwhile, in Western Europe there was an evolution at the political and institutional level, with the establishment of new multilateral agreements and trade partnerships. The creation of NATO (1949), the European Coal and Steel Community (1951) and the European Economic Community (1957) should be highlighted in order to consolidate the economic and institutional development of the relations of countries such as Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, among others that joined the blocs later, until the Europe we know today, with 27 Member States and a high degree of integration, cohesion, innovation and institutionalisation. (EU site) [2]

The fall of the Berlin Wall led to the opening of the European continent to Western trade and influences. The countries of the former Socialist bloc rushed to take measures and policies to move in the same direction as other neighbouring European countries to enrich and strengthen their economies. Since 1989, 11 countries have joined the European Union, including Bulgaria and Romania (2007), as well as Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia (2004), among others, showing

themselves to be open to the supranational European project and, after fulfilling the requirements for entry into the EU, showing themselves to be predisposed to accept and adapt to European values and identity. (EU site) [3]

However, despite the apparent growth and strengthening of the European Union over the years, its potential has not been fully exploited. The economic crisis of 2008 put into question the sustainable growth of all Member States, especially those more recently integrated or with more fragile economies such as Portugal or Greece, generating negative views of the European project. The 2008 crisis was one of the greatest challenges faced by the EU after the implementation of the Euro and shook the supremacy of the United States, creating doubts about the stability of the unipolar power model led by the USA (Tomov, 2017). [4]

The economic crisis changed the internal and external dynamics of the member states. The most resilient economies, such as the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, France or the United Kingdom, which at that time was still part of the European bloc, felt the harmful effects of an economic and social crisis that spread around the world. Even so, for this group of countries the Eurogroup's response to the crisis proved satisfactory since, in a short period of time and with the appropriate economic protectionism mechanisms, they executed a rapid economic recovery and the various social parameters affected, such as unemployment and inflation. The same cannot be said of countries whose economies proved to be more fragile. (Costa, 2015,) [5]

Now, still recovering from the global economic crisis that began in 2008, which drastically altered the internal and external dynamics of the Member States, we have witnessed uneven economic growth in Europe, which has led to a feeling of rejection of some European ideas and values by groups of citizens and political parties in various Member States. Countries such as Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Spain and France managed to overcome the damage of the crisis more quickly and their growth went on continuously and without major disruptions, even though they faced different challenges. Meanwhile the countries of the second gear, less powerful and economically prepared, faced enormous difficulties to stay afloat.

The decade that followed was a decade of challenges for all EU member states. After a period of recovery from the economic crisis, the migrant and refugee crisis resulting from the Arab Spring and civil wars in the Middle East, nationalist threats, the covid-19 pandemic and, most recently, the war fought between Ukraine and Russia. The responses to these challenges have been felt and accepted differently by European citizens and states.

This is the main idea that I retain from the chosen cartoon, a Europe at different speeds. Not only economically, but also in terms of social, cultural and migratory development where inequalities between member states occur, leading to adverse reactions from citizens who perceive the EU as an elitist supranational organisation. The lack of trust in the European project, as well as the less

satisfactory economic and commercial results have reduced the connection and identification that British citizens felt towards the European project, triggering the process known as Brexit. Furthermore, the belief that the distribution of capital among Member States is inefficient, the widespread impression that the European Union is not transparent and inhibits the sovereignty and development of Member States were reasons that contributed to the UK's exit from the European bloc.

The demonstration that democracy and the European project are in decline and that the elites no longer properly represent the interest of every European citizen are the weapons of the Eurosceptics who slow down the progress of the European project. The countries with weaker economies, represented by the second forward gear, have seen the emergence of new Eurosceptic and nationalist political forces that have given voice to the people's mistrust of the European project and values. This is happening for several reasons, one of which is the fact that citizens in certain areas of the EU do not identify or feel properly satisfied with European integration. The lack of European support and investment in certain areas, as well as corruption, fear of emigration and the relocation of refugees accentuate these ideas. In countries like Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, as well as in France, Euroscepticism has increased among the electorate, revealing some distrust with the European project and slowing down its progress and acceptance.

Thus, the understanding of member states on certain issues may diverge on several matters and occasions, shaking the feeling of unity. The DW Made for Minds article "Russia has profited €93 billion from energy since the beginning of the war" states that during the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine and despite the restrictions imposed by the European Union, states like Germany, Austria and Hungary continue to trade natural gas and other goods with the sanctioned Russia. (DW, 2022). [6] Even if there is a reduction in the consumption of Russian fuel, certain states have not yet managed to overcome this dependence, while others suffer the consequences of the cutting of diplomatic and trade relations with Russia. This weakens the supranational political sovereignty of the EU and the cohesion of the bloc, because it requires guidance and not all states follow EU guidelines in the same way.

Conclusion

It is possible to visualise a Europe at different speeds, shaped by the economic and commercial development of each Member State. This generates inequalities at different levels and different foreign policies within the European bloc. Inequalities between EU member states generate discontent and a sense of lack of integration among certain groups of citizens.

In fact, economic and social development and access to economic support have varied from country to country and this generates various consequences.

Among them, the decrease in the levels of identification of citizens with the European project, the cohesion and union of Member States is also affected and social and economic inequalities are felt. Thus, some States choose to follow alternative paths of development, which do not pass only through the sphere of influence of the European Union, shaking the unified balance of power of the bloc.

Thus, besides the existence of differences at a social, economic and identity level between Member States, their disunity in essential matters such as the import of Russian fossil fuels or the relocation of migrants, affects the development of the European project in full and of its Member States in a sustained and united way. In this way the European Union is not taking full advantage of its potential and will not be able to face the new challenges and global powers that have emerged in the last two decades, including India, China and Russia, and will remain a commercial ally of USA.

Note: The student essay was written under the course in European Identity in Spring 2022 as a contribution to the project: Transform4Europe – T4E: The European University for Knowledge Entrepreneurs - T4E.

References and Notes

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