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Hungarian and European at the Same Time: Exploring the Connections between National and European Identities

Introduction

“For the national administration, carrying out the tasks of the Presidency is the pinnacle of being within the EU’s institutional system”,¹ a major challenge, as operating Council configurations and coordinating the preparation of decisions require careful planning and precise execution. When a Member State debuts in this role for the first time, as Hungary did in 2011, it is usually said to have reached the age of maturity; to have gained sufficient experience in EU decision-making to be able to run the rotating Council Presidency. The presidency, however, is not only an operational task, but also a special forum for Hungary and the Hungarians. It is a time when the entire European Union and all its Member States, including the public in Hungary, directs its attention to the Presidency. In 2024, we will hold the rotating presidency for the second time in a trio, twenty years after our accession to the European Union. How will Hungary meet the challenge this time? The Presidency will no longer be a test of our maturity, but rather a test of our ability to steer the agenda and decision-making of a European Union in a permanent, multi-level crisis² and a changing global political and economic environment.

This chapter, unlike the other writings in this volume, looks at Europe from the perspective of the smallest, yet most important actors in the political system, the individuals, the union citizens. It examines the question whether citizens have come any closer to Europe in the past twenty years? In addition to their national and other attachments, have they also developed a European identity? After presenting the theoretical approach, and drawing on the results of public opinion polls, I will explore the interrelations between national and European identity using the Hungarian example.

Theoretical explanations³

Ferenc Pataki, the founder of identity theory in Hungary, defined identity as a concept describing the relationship between the individual and the community or various

¹ ARATÓ–KOLLER 2019: 215.

² KOLLER 2021: 6.

³ In this section, I build on the conclusions of my earlier publications and the schools of thought detailed in them in order to present approaches to identity theories and the academic discourse of nation and nationalism (see KOLLER 2006; KOLLER 2022).



communities.⁴ Our identity is made up of countless elements, of which it is worthwhile to distinguish clearly between the individual and the social or, in other words, the so-called collective elements.⁵ When we look at the links between national and European identity, we, of course, focus on the latter.

The cohesion of communities and social groups is facilitated by the identification of shared beliefs, such as common values, goals and ideological elements, which influence the process of identity formation.⁶ Identity theorists have noted that, when defining one's own group, namely 'us', individuals typically bias their view of the group positively, to protect a positive self-image, while also acknowledging the uniqueness of each group member.⁷ In contrast, external groups, other communities, are assumed to be more homogeneous, and depending on the degree to which they threaten their own group, perceptions of external groups can range from suspicion, dislike and hostility to discrimination, exclusion, even confrontation.⁸ Depending on the degree to which they threaten their own group, the perception of external groups can range from suspicion, dislike and hostility to discrimination, exclusion, or even confrontation.⁹ The external groups, the category 'they', are thus treated by the individuals in a manner distinct from their own group, referred to as 'us'.¹⁰

A fundamental indicator of the identity formation process is that the individuals are constantly comparing their own group memberships with that of others and shaping their own identity through this process. The social identity of the individuals is also a function of the evaluation of their own social position.¹¹ In order to define ourselves, we must also be able to say which groups we do not belong to, with which we do not identify.¹² "It is a fundamental characteristic of identity that identification only ever makes sense in relation to something."¹³ "The self-determination of identity can be understood as the result of a representational struggle, always concerned with the ability of groups or individuals to communicate their own distinctiveness to others."¹⁴

Anthony D. Smith defines the nation in his famous book on national identity as "a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members".¹⁵ The nation has played a prominent role in the history of Europe, and the nation is still one of the most important communities of social identity for European

⁴ KOLLER 2006: 45.

⁵ Pataki also typologised the different identity elements, distinguishing between 1. anthropological; 2. positional or role and group; 3. those acquired through social qualification operations and speech acts; 4. ideological; and 5. emblematic identity elements (see PATAKI 1986).

⁶ BAR-TAL 2000.

⁷ SMITH-MACKIE 2004: 339.

⁸ SMITH-MACKIE 2004: 339.

⁹ SMITH-MACKIE 2004: 339.

¹⁰ KOLLER 2022: 368.

¹¹ SARBIN-SCHIEBE 1983: 5–28.

¹² KOLLER 2006: 50.

¹³ KOLLER 2006: 50.

¹⁴ HANÁK 1997: 63–68.

¹⁵ SMITH 1991: 14.

citizens.¹⁶ However, the content of the concept of nation differs from one definition to another. Some authors highlight the importance of ancestry, others the importance of the cultural traits¹⁷ and other scholars emphasise the importance of the set of symbols and myths rooted in the past that hold the national community together.¹⁸ Ethnosymbolists argue that a common ethnic past, myths and symbols rooted in a shared history are necessary for successful nation-building, and that these elements constitute the identity of individuals through collective memory. Therefore, in the absence of a common ethnic past, identity formation cannot be successful.¹⁹ By contrast, constructivists argue that the symbols of nations are fictional and construed, thus the nations are relatively new entities, or as Anderson argues “imagined communities”.²⁰ They argue that intellectuals and elites played a key role in the creation of national symbols. In the 19th century, “the lexicographers, philologists, grammarians, folklorists, publicists and composers” were the opinion-formers of the era, portraying the ‘golden age’ of the glorious past of the nation, making it accessible to the wider public and making the “imagined community”, namely the nation, accessible to a larger crowd of people.²¹ Applying Anderson’s theory to the present, the actors of the political elite, political parties, the media, NGOs and stakeholders, as well as the European Union itself, are now key players in the process of identity formation. They are all agents in the construction of collective identities.

The basic question of national identity, namely “Who am I?” can only be answered after identifying nationalism and the types of nation-building. Group categories also exist in case of the nation as an “imagined community”, and individuals constantly evaluate and interpret their own group memberships in relation to the nation.²²

Most nations today have both historical roots and construed identity symbols. However, it is worth stressing that the nations of Europe have followed different paths of national development, and the differences between them still define and furnish uniqueness to their identities today.²³ These differences are easily identified in the different concepts of nation. At the beginning of the 20th century, the German historian Friedrich Meinecke distinguished between two types of nation: the political nation, which is defined by a given territory, legal and institutional systems and political means, and the cultural nation, where the national community is defined by ethnic and cultural elements.²⁴ The two types of nations formulated by Meinecke also appeared in the later typologies of nations; vested with geographic dimensions,²⁵ but also²⁶ in later theories that distinguish between civic and ethnic concepts of nation. In case of the French or the English approach,

¹⁶ KOLLER 2006: 11–44.

¹⁷ GEERTZ 1973.

¹⁸ VAN DEN BERGHE 1978: 401–411.

¹⁹ SMITH 1986; 1991.

²⁰ HOBBSBAWM–RANGER 1983; ANDERSON 1991.

²¹ ANDERSON 1991.

²² KOLLER 2022: 371.

²³ KOLLER 2022: 369.

²⁴ MEINECKE 1969 [1907].

²⁵ COBBAN 1944; KOHN 1955.

²⁶ SMITH 1991.

territorial self-determination is more pronounced. The consequence of this is that while German authors have several definitions for cultural nations, French and Anglo-Saxon authors tend to use the concept of civic nation for their definition of nation.²⁷

The term “nation” in Hungarian language is mostly used in the cultural sense, similarly to the German use of the term, and is therefore separate from the civic concept, meaning foremost a community of culture.²⁸

Central European nation-building patterns can be described by additional unique features.²⁹ Brubaker’s typology of triple nationalism, for example, can be applied to the understanding of the identities of the ethnically and culturally diverse Central European region, and therefore also to Hungarian national identity. This typology distinguishes between the types of nation-building nationalism, mother country nationalism and minority nationalism.³⁰ Another peculiar feature is that a new kind of nationalism emerged in the Central European region following the change of regime, since during the communist period there was only a very limited possibility for nation-building, so when the Iron Curtain fell, the Central Europeans’ need for nation-building surfaced in almost all states, but in different ways.³¹ Recognition in this region is based not only on the recognition of sovereignty, but also on “values such as pride, dignity and authority”, which the Western world has long ignored in relation to Central Europeans.³²

So far, apart from referring to the nation as the privileged community of our collective identity, we have not talked about our other communities, social groups, which are also a part of our collective identities. Beyond national identity, other communities also belong to our collective identities. The local, the regional and European identities are essential elements of our collective self-understanding.³³ What kind of a relationship can be conceived between each of these attachments? Can it be stated, for example, that the nation is the most important community of our collective identity, or is it conceivable that national, regional, local and European identities are just as important categories as our attachment to the nation?³⁴ There are authors who assume a hierarchy between identity elements and believe that a hierarchy of importance can be defined between individual and collective attachments.³⁵ Other authors emphasise the co-existence of collective identity elements and believe that the relationship between identity elements can be described by concentric circles,³⁶ or multi-level structures, or through the so-called identity network

²⁷ GIDDENS 1995.

²⁸ ROMSICS 1998: 9–10.

²⁹ DIÓSZEGI 1991: 131–142.

³⁰ BRUBAKER 1996.

³¹ ÖRKÉNY 2005: 28–48.

³² BRIX–BUSEK 2019: 111.

³³ KOLLER 2022: 372.

³⁴ The results of Eurobarometer polls have already demonstrated that not all EU citizens are most strongly attached to their nation, and that attachment to local communities or even regions can be stronger than attachment to the nation (see KOLLER 2006: 129).

³⁵ PATAKI 1986.

³⁶ José Miguel Salazar questions the hierarchy between levels of collective identity, thinking in terms of concentric circles of collective identities. In his theory, concentric circles represent a level of identity of the individual. The closer the geographical unit, the stronger the link (see SALAZAR 1998: 114–122).

model.³⁷ What all these theories have in common is that they define the relationship between collective identity elements in a multi-level system. Society, institutional and political structures, including national and EU institutions, are constantly influencing and actively shaping the process of identity formation. However, bottom-up socialisation processes also play a role in collective identity formation,³⁸ meaning that not all construed identity elements resonate with individuals to the same degree.

European and EU identity

When Hungary, together with the other Central and Eastern European countries, joined the European Union in 2004, the construed symbols created by the European elites to establish and strengthen the direct link between the community and the individual were already in place. While it is important to stress that the concept of European identity exists, historically and culturally, independently of the Union, it was in the 1970s that the European Community first expressed the need³⁹ for bringing European integration that was hitherto operated by the elites, closer to its citizens. By this time, integration had already reached a high level, especially in the economic field, which could no longer exist without the greater support of its citizens and, through them, the legitimacy of the political community.⁴⁰ Several theorists, including Joseph Weiler, saw the future of integration in the strengthening of the European political system by the citizens and the creation of a European *demos*. He argued that the creation of a European *demos* with civic values can ensure the functioning of a European democracy. However, this *demos* is heterogeneous; preserving the various cultures of the European nations.⁴¹

Since the 1970s, the European Community has, in parallel with building a political system, created the citizenship of the European Union, declared the rights of individuals in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and constructed symbols such as the flag, the anthem, the common motto, and, with the introduction of the euro, the single currency.⁴²

European identity has been more apparent than ever in the Central European nations' approach, including Hungary's, to the European Community and in the formulation of the objective of full membership. However, the "back to Europe" accession narrative did not primarily represent the integration bond, but, in a much broader temporal perspective, the unquestionable European identity of the thousand-year-old Hungarian nation and the need to return to the mainstream of European history. In the 2003 referendum on the Accession Treaty, a large majority of Hungarian citizens, 83.76% of voters, voted in favour of EU

³⁷ The author first developed the *identity network* model in his doctoral dissertation, but has built on it in subsequent work (see KOLLER 2003).

³⁸ RISSE 2005: 295.

³⁹ KOLLER 2019b: 173–184.

⁴⁰ Report by former Belgian Prime Minister Leo Tindemans in 1976 (see KOLLER 2019b: 174).

⁴¹ WEILER 1997: 97–131.

⁴² KOLLER 2019b: 173–184.

membership.⁴³ However, we only became familiar with the practical operation of the European Union and EU identity after we became full members, with the structural and symbolic elements of the EU identity already in place.

The European Union is a special political community. Not only its treaties, institutions and policies change from time to time, but so do its borders. The history of the European Union is also a history of successive enlargements and, since the U.K.'s withdrawal, already one of territorial loss. Self-definition is therefore always a challenge for EU citizens. Enlargements, as well as welcoming people from the outside are not conflict-free processes. "The accession of a new Member State creates an inclusion pressure in the European Union."⁴⁴ In the definition of group identities, we need to re-construct the answers to the question "Who am I?" "What does it mean to be European?" Sometimes, citizens of the old Member States already in the EU identify more quickly with the newcomers, or, on the contrary, do not identify with them for a long time. It is not only the process of inclusion but also the process of arrival that poses challenges, and gaining full membership does not necessarily imply the inclusion of a European dimension in the identity elements. Nevertheless, it may also happen that, despite having gained full membership, individuals who have become union citizens still consider themselves to be outsiders, and different.⁴⁵

In case of Central Europeans, and Hungary as well, in the post-accession period, the inclusion of new members was delayed by some of the citizens of the old Member States, and Central European states were regarded as so-called *New Member States*. The 'us' category of collective identity thus did not include Central Europeans for quite a few years.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, some Central European states, including Hungary, learning the rules of the game and the functioning of the European Union, started to reverse the top-down direction of Europeanisation, leaving behind adaptive modes of cooperation, and became more fierce in their struggle not only with a view to asserting their national interests but also to defining the common agenda of the European Union. Central Europeans, disillusioned with the 'adaptive phase', became, so to speak, 'emancipated', and they themselves wanted and still want to shape the functioning and future of the European Union as a whole. This change occurred somewhere towards the end of the first decade following 2000 in the Central European states, including Hungary, giving way to the so-called bottom-up Europeanisation efforts. If one accepts Fukuyama's thesis⁴⁷ that "the struggle for recognition was the ultimate driver of human history", then it can certainly be said that, after Central Europeans gained full membership, the need to struggle for recognition as equal members of the EU became, and still is, incremental. But how did this manifest in citizens' attitudes towards the European Union?

⁴³ Országos Választási Iroda 2003.

⁴⁴ KOLLER 2019b: 177.

⁴⁵ KOLLER 2019b: 177.

⁴⁶ A similar pattern was observed in European integration after the other enlargement rounds. For example, even after Greece's membership in 1981, many citizens of the old Member States still felt that Greece should not have been admitted to the EC.

⁴⁷ FUKUYAMA 2018: 10.

Public opinion on the EU

To present the Hungarian public's opinion on European integration, standardised *Eurobarometer* surveys funded by the European Commission and based on a representative sample, as well as surveys conducted by Hungarian opinion pollsters, are also available. They examine perceptions of EU membership, feelings of national and European identity and citizenship, and trust in EU and national institutions.

According to a survey carried out immediately after our accession, 64% of the population in 2004 considered themselves only national citizens,⁴⁸ and 32% said they felt both Hungarian and European.⁴⁹ Thus, when asked about the combined presence of the national and European dimensions, Hungarians preferred their citizenship. Interestingly, at the same time, in surveys asking about the emotional dimension of identity, in other words European pride, Hungarians were the most proud of their European identity (87%), compared to 68% on average in the European Union. Hence, in the year of accession, national identity was the primary collective identity element for the majority of Hungarians, but the European dimension had already emerged among the collective identities of the population.⁵⁰

The 2020 special Eurobarometer survey resulted in a different outcome, by using a different set of questions. According to the survey, 87% of Hungarians said they identify with their nation, the second highest in the EU (after Portugal) out of the 27 EU Member States. When asked about European identity, Hungary has the highest proportion of people in the EU who identify themselves (also) as Europeans, 76% of the population.⁵¹ In a V4 comparison, more people in each of the Visegrád countries said they had a European identity than the EU27 in average. The national and European identity of Hungarian citizens is also the strongest among the V4 countries.

The most recent polls undertaken in 2023 show that around 80% of the Hungarian population also consider themselves to be union citizens.⁵² In addition to their strong national attachments, Hungarians now also have a strong European identity. It should also be emphasised that the identities linked to the immediate place of residence, town or village are also very important for Hungarians.⁵³ Consequently, in addition to national and European identities, other communities are also part of the collective, multiple identities of Hungarians, which confirms the theses of multilevel identity theories on the basis of the Hungarian example.

⁴⁸ In the same survey, on average 47% of EU citizens felt both national and European, 7% European and national and 3% only European (57% of the population in total), compared to 41% who considered themselves only nationals (*Standard Eurobarometer 62* 2004).

⁴⁹ *Standard Eurobarometer 62* 2004.

⁵⁰ ARATÓ–KOLLER 2019: 234.

⁵¹ BECUWE–BANETH 2021.

⁵² *Standard Eurobarometer 99* 2023.

⁵³ *Standard Eurobarometer 99* 2023.

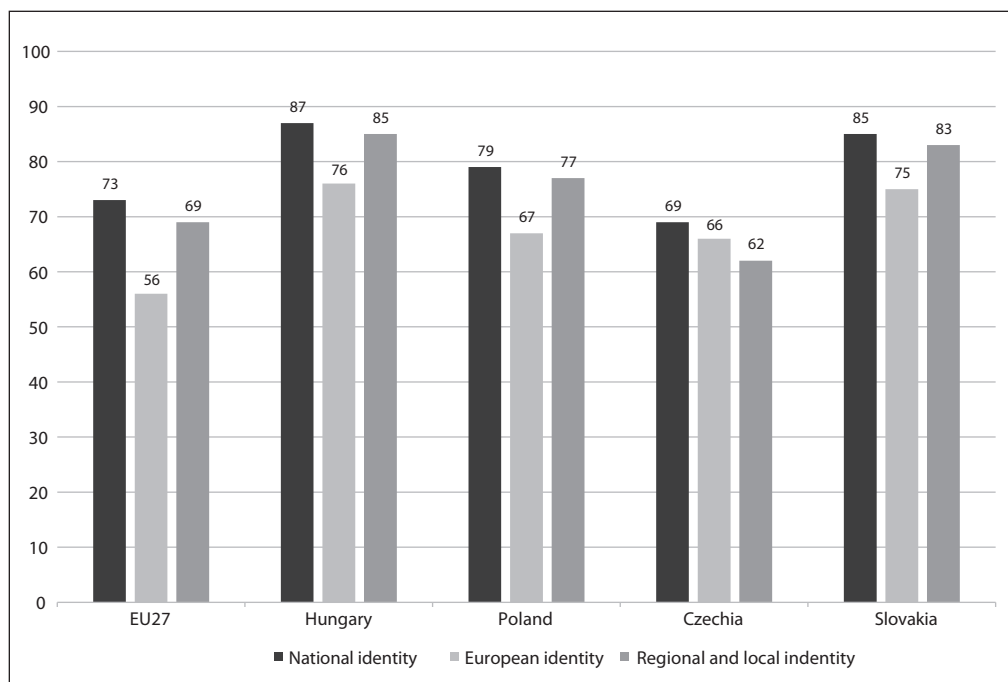


Figure 1: National, European and regional/local attachments of EU and V4 citizens, 2021 (%)

Source: Compiled by the author based on BECUWE–BANETH 2021

20 years after our accession, Hungary's membership of the EU enjoys the support of the majority of the population. According to a survey conducted by Policy Solutions, in the event of a referendum on EU membership, 72% of the Hungarians would vote yes to membership, compared to 13% who would support exiting the EU.⁵⁴ At the same time, the views of the Hungarian public are more pessimistic about developments in the European Union. In 2023, 47% of Hungarians think things are not going in the right direction in the EU, compared to 44% who support the current direction of the EU.⁵⁵

The perception of trust in institutions can reveal significant traits of citizen attachments.⁵⁶ The degree of trust citizens have in some of the institutions is a good indicator of the extent to which they believe that their affairs and the resolution of their problems are in good hands. Based on the results of the Eurobarometer surveys, a significant loss of trust can be observed in both the European Union and the domestic institutions over the past fifteen years.⁵⁷ According to the 2023 survey, Hungarian citizens trust the police and regional and local authorities the most, and political parties and the media the least. The European Union and the domestic political institutions are now situated between

⁵⁴ BÍRÓ-NAGY 2023: 15.

⁵⁵ BÍRÓ-NAGY 2023: 40.

⁵⁶ KOLLER 2019b: 178.

⁵⁷ KOLLER 2019b: 178.

these two endpoints. 54% of Hungarians trust the European Union, 41% trust the national government and 38% trust the national Parliament. Thus, in the specific multi-level governance system of the European Union, different levels of trust can be identified among Hungarians, but it can also be stated that, currently, trust in the EU is higher than in most domestic political institutions.⁵⁸ Hungarian citizens, therefore, not only identify with the EU, but also see themselves as part of the European Union's political system.

Conclusions

The analysis of national and European identities among Hungarian union citizens showed that Hungarians have strong national and European attachments, as well as a strong identity linked to their place of residence. The European identity of Hungarians is the strongest in the Union of 27 Member States, and also within the Visegrád Four. Although the concept of European identity can also be understood outside the European Union, our twenty years of membership have contributed to strengthening the European dimension in the multiple identity structures of Hungarians. Support for EU membership is high in Hungary, but the public is divided on whether European integration is going in the right or wrong direction. Although we cannot yet talk about the creation of a European *demos*, and there are several signs that some citizens have recently lost confidence in both domestic and EU institutions, opinion polls show that the majority of Hungarians trust the European Union.

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⁵⁸ Standard Eurobarometer 99 2023.

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