"We have made Europe, now we have to make Europeans": Researching European Identity among Flemish Youths

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Abstract

After the rejection of the European Constitution in 2005, questions were raised about if and how European citizens feel connected to the European Union (EU). This article examines the image young, Flemish people have of the EU and whether they feel some sense of belonging in the EU. The research draws upon a qualitative study in which Flemish young people were asked how they felt towards the EU and how they perceived it. Using a social-constructionist perspective, the first part of the article concentrates on the concept of European identity and the theoretical divide between a civic and a cultural European political identity, as proposed by Bruter (2004). The second part of the article focuses on the results of a series of focus groups with young people (aged 17 to 19), held in spring 2007. The article argues that no strong European identity is yet present in the hearts and minds of these young people, although contexts and interactions might evoke a limited notion of European identity. This article offers an empirical account of a theoretical debate and presents a critical understanding of the dynamics at play in European identity construction.

A SERIES OF EVENTS THAT INCLUDED THE REJECTION OF THE TREATY ESTABLISHING A Constitution for Europe, the low turnout for the European parliamentary elections in 2004 and a general feeling of apathy towards politics in (especially) western Europe resulted in a European Union (EU)¹ searching for (new) ways to bond with its citizens. The rejection of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, in particular, was considered a slap in the face for Eurocrats in Brussels. A period of reflection followed in which the EU started looking for answers to difficult questions on how to communicate better, how to get citizens more involved and also on how to get citizens to identify with the EU. The issue of identity and identity construction has been a topic not only political scientists struggle with. There has also been discussion among academics from different disciplines (philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology) about the fluid concept of identity. These debates go beyond the EU identity issue and deal with how identity is being defined and how it is constructed in general (Cerulo 1997; Cruz 2000).

Few researchers have explored the concept of European identity both theoretically and empirically (Bruter 2004; Citrin & Sides 2004). This is due to two factors: on the one

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¹ For the purpose of this research, this article makes no clear distinction between Europe and the EU although it is clear the two are (still) not the same. People are perfectly capable of feeling a sense of belonging to Europe in general, without feeling an attachment to the EU at all or vice versa. This article follows, however, the line of reasoning of Brigid Laffan, who states that the EU, as an active identity builder, increasingly defines what it means to belong to Europe and to be European. Europe and the EU are thus more and more used interchangeably (Laffan 2004: 76).

hand, researching European identity has been a new field of study emerging over the past 10 years and, on the other hand, it poses a challenging subject to investigate. Data from the European Commission's EU-wide public opinion survey Eurobarometer provided some quantitative knowledge about the idea of European identity, but failed to give more in-depth knowledge of what it might mean (or might not mean) to feel European. Eurobarometer surveys have also been criticized in terms of measurement and continuity (Sinnot 2005: 216; also see Bruter in this volume). As of today, hardly any other equally elaborated quantitative research exists, hence Eurobarometer results remain an important point of reference in this debate. Therefore, additional qualitative research is necessary (Cerutti 2006: 4).

This article intends to complement earlier, primarily quantitative, research with a qualitative approach based on focus groups. The research design has three objectives. Firstly, the research focuses on the perception and image Flemish young people (between the ages of 17 -19) have of the EU by using a metaphor analysis. The second focus point is on what it means (or does not mean) for these young people to feel European and to identify with the EU. In a final phase these two components and their interaction are analysed.

The first part of this article examines the theoretical background of the identity concept and takes a closer look at what a European identity might constitute. According to Bruter, this European identity consists of two components, a cultural and a civic one (Bruter 2004: 188, 2005: 11). This theoretical differentiation serves as a framework on which the empirical research is built. The second part of the article explores the results from six focus groups with Flemish young people, held in spring 2007. The target group were young people (aged 17 to 19), because they represent the future generation that will have grown up with the EU as a more or less self-evident entity. While the metaphor analysis discerns seven trends in the perception and image of the EU, the focus group discussions, show that no psychological existence of the European community is yet present in the hearts and minds of these young Europeans.

Exploring identity conceptually

Identity as point of departure

The concept of identity is hard to define. In philosophy and psychology, identity is defined as something that closes the gap between one's 'Self' and the outside world (Mummendey, Waldzus 2004: 60). Individuals may be unique and independent, but the way they perceive themselves is constructed in interaction with the outside world. As such, identity can be defined as a web of feelings of belonging to certain groups and feelings of exclusion from other groups. Identity always entails a subjective notion of pre-set ideas and beliefs people have about who they are and where they belong to (Bakke 1995: 2). This definition touches upon a core element in the identity formation process, namely the existence of what we can call 'the Other' or 'the out-group'. A certain identity always implies a notion of what you are not. People arguably identify themselves with a certain gender, religion or age group. All these elements compose a unique identity, but at the same time also define who you are not and to which groups you do not belong (Mummendey, Waldzus 2004: 61).

For political scientists there are certain characteristics of identity that should be taken into account. First, identities are not fixed and rigid phenomena. They are flexible, dynamic and changeable. An identity is not something that is always present, it is actually very much context related (Widdicombe 1998: 193). Second, identity still remains a highly individual issue, which can have general characteristics that most people share, but which will always have a very personal outlook. This, however, does not mean that identity should be perceived as something completely non-committal and loose. It provides a more or less amalgamated symbolic structure that reassures a

certain level of continuity in people's lives. Identity gives meaning and makes sure people can function in their daily lives (Widdicombe 1998: 194). A third characteristic of identities is that they are a product of collective construction over time. They are a result of traditions and aspirations as well as of exchange and reciprocity (Garcia 1993: 10).

Our own national identities are the result of determined efforts to construct a sense of belonging (Hobsbawm *et al.* 1983; Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983). This raises questions about the possibility of a European identity. If national identity could be constructed, then what about its European counterpart?

European identity: fact or fiction?

Researching the EU's expansion and structural development raises the question of European identity. The increasing salience of the issue of a European identity can be attributed to the following reasons. First of all, the EU has chosen a more political course ever since the Treaty of Maastricht on European Union. The EU tries to go beyond a pure economic construction by creating a European citizenship and a (rejected) Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (Dinan 2004: 245). Throughout the years the EU has gained more prominence in people's lives because of the growing number of policies it is responsible for. This attempt to become a political unit is unlikely to be sustained without the support of the people. This support is, however, not guaranteed by a solely economic unity. As Delors put it once: "People do not fall in love with a market" (as cited in Castano 2004: 41). A second reason is related to the first one. In search of legitimacy, identity becomes an indispensable element: "The search for new principles of European legitimacy is inextricably bound up with the attempt to create a space in which collective identities can be formed" (Delanty 1995: viii).

Identity is not seen as something that evokes legitimacy all by itself, but as a component that contributes to the strengthening of the EU's legitimacy. A third reason concerns the relationship between national and European identity, as Eurobarometer data indicate. Looking at the level of attachment to the EU, 49 per cent of the respondents say they feel attached to the EU, while up to 91 per cent claim they feel attached to their country (Eurobarometer 2007: 67). There remains a big gap between these two levels. The data indicate that further research concerning this topic would be valuable.

Although these reasons emphasize the need for researching EU-identity, there is no general agreement on the existence or not of a European identity, let alone on what it constitutes one. Some scholars are sceptical about the idea of such an identity form (Höjelid 2001). A majority, however, is rather positive and departs from a more broadly supported idea of multiple identities (Cerutti 1992; Weiler 1999: 344; Risse 2001). At the same time, these scholars have very different ideas on how to define identity and what it is based on. According to the recent work of Ruiz Jiminez *et al.* (2004: 2) the differing views can be categorised into three subdivisions that include cultural, instrumental and civic theories.

Cultural scholars claim that a European identity cannot be created by the same components as a national identity (language, cultural background, symbols, etc.). Europe is too diverse and it is a utopia to think that common, shared characteristics can be found (Smith 1992: 62). These scholars are rather sceptical towards the idea of a European identity but do not completely exclude the possibility of its existence (Siedentop 2001: 86). Their view is that if it does arise, it would most certainly replace national identities. According to Smith (1992: 62):

"national identifications possess distinct advantages over the idea of a unified European identity. They are vivid, accessible, well established, long popularised, and still widely

believed, in broad outline at least. In each of these respects, 'Europe' is deficient both as idea and as process. Above all, it lacks a pre-modern past – a 'prehistory' which can provide it with emotional sustenance and historical depth".

Instrumental scholars, on the other hand, state that the existence of a European identity depends on a cost-benefit analysis (Cinnirella 1997; Gabel 1997: 11). Citizens are perceived as rational actors who will base their decision to feel (or not to feel) European on rational arguments. If membership of the community provides them with more advantages than disadvantages, a European identity will be formed (Ruiz Jiminez et al. 2004: 3). Kritzinger's research confirms this hypothesis. If European institutions are seen as the most efficient to approach certain issues/problems, a shift in loyalty to the European level will occur. This way, according to 'instrumentalists', a European identity can be created based on instrumental motives (Kritzinger 2005: 53).

A last strand of scholars are the civic scholars, such as Habermas and Bartolini, who support the idea of a shared belief in values and duties of the EU, preferably exemplified in a European constitution. This function of a constitution is being referred to as 'constitutional patriotism' (Karlsson 1999; Baubock 1997; Fossum 2001). This means that the basis of a European identity lies with a shared loyalty towards a constitution. Civic scholars dismiss the need to look for a shared culture, a shared history or a shared ethnical background (Baubock 1997). The ambition is not to create an 'ethnos' but a 'demos'. The goal is to obtain a post national identity form that goes beyond the need for a common ethnic background.

Both instrumental and civic scholars try, each in their own way, to move beyond the pitfalls of ethnic and cultural differences that characterize Europe. According to these scholars there is no need for a European identity based on the same elements as the national counterpart. For civic scholars like Bartolini (2002), "a civic commitment to constitutional values, and civic duties, a citizenship conception of the political community and the development of a 'republican' patriotism, can be enough to define a layer of political community built upon the ethno-cultural differentiation of the European peoples". For instrumental scholars, a rational cost-benefit analysis suffices.

The aforementioned subdivision in three categories represents different theoretical outlooks on the issue of European identity. However, the biggest difference remains that between cultural and civic scholars, with both having very different points of departure in this debate. Bruter surpasses this deadlock by uniting both elements (civic/cultural) in his definition of a European identity (Bruter 2004: 188; 2005: 11). The cultural component hereby refers to feeling closer connected to people belonging to a group than people who don't belong to a group. In a European context this means that people feel a stronger sense of belonging to other Europeans than to non-Europeans. The civic component, on the other hand, refers to the identification of an individual with a certain political structure, in this case the EU. Both elements can be present in one's European identity, but this is not strictly necessary according to Bruter.

Bruter's definition is complemented in this article with a definition by Tajfel (1981: 255), who argues that: "European identity is that part of the individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership". According to Tajfel, a social and an affective component cannot be lacking and there is a need for what Castano calls a psychological existence of the community (Castano 2004: 41). An often heard witticism is: 'Would you die for Europe?'

To sum up, this article defines European identity as being composed of a civic and/or cultural element and together with a social and affective component. In other words, to be able to speak of a European identity, it should be present in both the hearts and minds of the people.

Young people and the EU

Some studies specifically focus on European identity among young people. An important point of reference in this debate is the European Commission funded project on 'orientations of young men and women to citizenship and European identity' (Jamieson *et al.* 2005). This large-scale research (the six countries involved are: United Kingdom, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Spain, Germany and Austria) took 36 months to complete (Jamieson 2005). The study researches young men and women's orientations to European identity and citizenship. This research, however, is primarily based on quantitative survey analysis. In contrast to that, research on young people and European identity, done by Du Bois-Reymond (1998: 37), suggests that qualitative research and focus groups in particular, are well suited for the task of unfolding the different dimensions of a European identity. This article thus follows Du Bois-Reymond's qualitative research approach to analyse the perceptions of young Flemish people about the EU and whether or not they identify with it.²

Young people were chosen as a target group, firstly, because they have grown up with the EU as a given entity that provides them with certain benefits, which stem from free movement, a single EU-wide currency and Erasmus Mundus, the European Commission's academic mobility programme. These experienced benefits stand in sharp contrast to older generations' shared tragic memories of World War II. According to Tsafos one of the main challenges for the EU is to make its youth feel European, since Eurobarometer results show that young people in the EU (aged 15 to 24) do not significantly feel more European than older generations (Tsafos 2006: 181; Eurobarometer 2005). About two thirds of young Europeans feel attached to Europe and about 56 per cent of these youngsters claim they feel connected to their own country and to Europe. These percentages are only slightly higher than what the rest of the EU population states (Eurobarometer 2005).³ Intuitively, higher percentages could have been expected, since creating a sense of belonging is a long-term process. The EU is thus facing a big challenge in trying to connect with a generation that has grown up with the EU and, presumably, takes the EU for granted (Tsafos 2006: 181).

Secondly, Eurobarometer results also show that only one third of young Europeans (aged 18 to 24) participated in the European parliamentary elections of 2004. This is significantly below the 45.6 per cent average (Eurobarometer 2005: 7). This lack of participation reflects a feeling of apathy and lack of interest in politics, which is also confirmed by this Eurobarometer study (Eurobarometer 2005).

Thirdly, over the last couple of years, the EU has put more effort into connecting with its young citizens. The European Commission's Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, for instance, mentions a focus in its communication strategy on young people and the importance of getting them involved (Commission of the European Communities 2006: 7). EU initiatives, such as Spring Day for Europe and the European Youth Forum, are aimed at encouraging debate and getting young people interested in European policies. A framework for cooperation in youth policies, based on an earlier White Paper, was developed in 2001 by the Council of the European Union (Commission of the European Communities 2001). This framework focuses on young people's active citizenship, social and occupational integration and on including a youth dimension in other policies (Commission of the European Communities n.d.). All these recent initiatives show that young people are becoming an increasingly important target group for the EU.

² For future research, young people from the French speaking part of Belgium could also be asked about their perceptions of the EU and their identities. This would complement the findings of this article. By and large, this research design could be used to analyse the perception and potential European identity of young Europeans in different EU countries.

 $^{^{3}}$ 66 per cent of the EU population feels connected to the EU; 54 per cent of the EU population feels attached to both their country and the EU

Research design

In an attempt to address the three objectives, set out in the introduction of this article, the research design was based on two intertwining parts. A first part, aimed at tackling the first objective on images and perceptions of the EU, consisted of a short survey that contained one open question. This question prompted the Flemish pupils to compare the EU to an animal and clarify their choice. This comparison approach is based on the logic of metaphor analysis, since this kind of analysis allows a better, more personal and deeper understanding of what image the EU has for these pupils. By letting them come up with metaphors to describe the EU, it is possible to uncover individual patterns of thought and action. Indirectly asking these pupils to compare the EU to an animal and why, can elicit more personal and deeper accounts (Schmitt 2005: 363). The animals they refer to are not important as such, but the reason/motivation behind their choice reveals a great deal.⁴ Based on the responses on this question, seven trends in the perception and image of the EU are discerned.

The second part of the research focused on the second objective, namely the potential European identity of these young people. This part is predominantly based on the results and analysis of six focus groups held in six different Flemish schools in the spring of 2007 to explore and deepen the understanding of European identity. Specific questions were asked in relation to the reception and interpretation of certain European civic/cultural symbols (e.g. Euro, European flag, etc.). The European flag, the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe and a selection of photos of famous European politicians were used as examples of what has been called indicators of civic identity (Bruter 2005: 103). For the cultural component, reference was made to the European anthem since this symbol implies a greater connection with other Europeans.

A qualitative research design was specifically chosen to complement existing quantitative research (e.g. Eurobarometer). Focus groups permit this kind of in-depth research. They also make it possible to find out as much as possible about participants' experiences and feelings on a given topic, in this case European identity (Morgan and Krueger 1993: 7).

The groups consisted of a minimum of eight and a maximum of 13 pupils aged between 17 and 19 years. The six participating schools were randomly chosen and consisted of five catholic schools and one public school.⁵ This is entirely coincidental and has furthermore no importance in this research design since it is not the aim to discern any linkages between education systems and identity formation. The participating groups of pupils had to meet two criteria, namely the group couldn't consist of over 13 pupils or less than eight pupils and the pupils had to be in their final year of high school. Based on these criteria, six groups based on six classes were selected. The fact that the chosen groups were actual classes and did not need to be composed created the advantage that all pupils and not just those interested in EU affairs participated. In total 76 pupils were involved. The sum of groups was a good mixture of gender, race and religion, which brought out an interesting mix of opinions and views on the EU. All focus group discussions were film and tape recorded. Afterwards, the discussions were fully transcribed for a thorough analysis.

The region Flanders, in particular, was chosen because of its complex identity structure. Discussing Flemish identity has been on the rise over the last couple of years and Belgian identity seems to be in decline or is at least a point of discussion (Lecours 2001: 53). Flanders is, as such, an interesting case study. First, because no empirical research

⁴ In appendix 1 a table has been added, containing a full list of animal names and their frequency

⁵ The six participating schools were: Immaculata instituut, De Panne; Vrij Technisch Instituut, Veurne; Sint Bavo, Gent; Sint-Barbara College, Gent; VISO Roeselare; Provinciaal Handels- en Taalinstituut, Gent.

on the European identity of Flemish pupils has been done before and second, because of the different identities at play in the region (Flemish, Belgian).

The results of a multiple choice question, asked in the survey, were used to address the final, third objective, namely the link between the image the EU has for these young people and their level of sense of belonging to the EU. This multiple choice question measured the level of identification with the EU of these young people by asking them to indicate their level of belonging on a scale ranging from one to six.⁶ Based on these responses, this article discerns trends between the level of belonging indicated and the image that these young people have of the EU.

Exploring European identity empirically

Image of the EU

To obtain more insights into the perception and image these young people have of the EU, the results of the open survey question were analysed. Based on these responses, seven trends can be discerned that indicate what kind of image the EU has for the respondents.

A first trend is that about one tenth of the participating pupils see the EU as something that has undergone or is undergoing rapid development. It started as something small but is now evolving into something bigger. The EU is presented as something dynamical, something that has not yet reached its final shape.

Another trend is the reference to something small. Some see this as positive thing; others perceive it as a negative aspect. In the positive way, young people refer to the power that lies in the cooperation of many different and small units (countries).

"Beaver. It is a hard worker and although it might be small, it accomplishes great things." (Charlotte, FG1)

In the negative sense, it refers to the weakness of the EU, especially in an international context. The EU is seen as a small and vulnerable entity that acts/reacts slowly and its power to do something is very limited. The pupils compare the EU to squirrels, microbes and turtles. Directly opposite to this view are the pupils who see the EU as an extremely powerful organization (reference to lions and elephants). The EU presents itself as a strong 'animal' on the world stage and is a serious counterbalance for other 'animals' on that same stage. The EU is being looked up to and has a superior personality.

It is striking how there can be such a contrast in the perceptions of the EU. On the one hand the EU is seen as a powerful player on the global stage, on the other hand it is seen as an entity that is trying hard, but does not succeed.

A fourth trend that can be observed refers to the flexibility and adaptability of the EU and its member states. Here the chameleon is the case *par excellence*. Another aspect often referred to is the versatility and diversity of the EU. The richness of cultures and the diversity of countries and people are considered a big plus for 14 per cent of the respondents. Repeated references are made to the butterfly as a creature that internalises these qualities/characteristics.

Almost one fifth of the pupils compare the EU to some kind of herd animal, which makes it the most frequent comparison. These animals cooperate, need to have faith in

⁶ The scale values are: 1 totally no sense of belonging, 2 no sense of belonging, 3 little sense of belonging, 4 sense of belonging, 5 strong sense of belonging, 6 very strong sense of belonging.

each other, are loyal and are mutually dependent. Ants and wolves are also often referred to.

In the last trend some pupils point out the unknown and distant character of the EU by the choice of their animals. The invisibility and the (seemingly) absence of the EU in their lives is a recurrent factor in all the focus groups.

"An octopus. With its arms it can put a lot of things in motion but it is often hidden in holes." (Arnout, FG 4)

"A spider. It has a lot of opportunities, with a web of opportunities. But it is very difficult to get in contact with it." (Brecht, FG 5)

References to the EU are rarely entirely negative. Only four pupils out of 76 described the EU in a negative way. The EU was, for example, compared to a monkey, because people working in politics are stupid.

Based on the metaphor analysis, it seems as if most pupils have a fairly positive image of the EU. It must be pointed out however that this rather positive attitude might partly stem from a lack of knowledge of the EU. This is also indicated by the pupils themselves.

"We do not know enough about it, frankly." (Lieke, FG6)

It is also important to highlight the rather high level of missing data in form of blank responses. Over one tenth of the pupils did not fill in the question to compare the EU to an animal. A potential explanation can be that these pupils feel that they do not know enough about the EU to make a comparison. Or that they are simply not interested enough in the EU to think about a comparison.

Image and identity

By using a multiple choice question, the level of sense of belonging to the EU of each respondent, was measured. This multiple choice question had a six divided scale, ranging from 'totally no sense of belonging to the EU' to 'very strong sense of belonging to the EU'. These responses were then linked to the image respondents had of the EU⁷. Based on this analysis, the results show that over 40 per cent of the respondents' state that they feel "a little sense of belonging to the EU." As this was the most chosen response, this indicates a low, but present level of belonging for a big part of the respondents. About a quarter of the respondents feels no sense of belonging whatsoever (no sense of belonging - totally no sense of belonging). This can also be seen as about three quarters of the respondents claiming they have some sense of belonging to the EU (ranging from a little sense to a very strong sense of belonging).

The analysis also shows that particularly those people who see the EU as a powerful and big entity claim to feel a sense of belonging to the EU⁸. The pupils seeing the EU as a cooperative entity also show a higher level of sense of belonging than the other trends⁹. The pupils who did not fill in the comparison question do not significantly indicate a lower sense of belonging than the other trends. There is about a half-half divide between no sense of belonging and a sense of belonging. Surprisingly, the only 'very strong sense of belonging' indicated, is to be found in this category.

⁷ In appendix 2 a table has been added containing the results of this analysis.

⁸ 12 out of 13 respondents who see the EU as a powerful entity, claim they feel at least a little sense of belonging to the EU.

⁹ 12 out of 14 respondents indicate at least a little sense of belonging to the EU.

National identities, European identities and context

In the following section this article elaborates on the second part of the empirical analysis which deals with the results of the focus groups and goes into detail about the idea of identity. The first phase of the focus groups concentrated on how these young people perceive their other, non-European political identities (nation, region, city/village). The question was asked whether they ascribe any meaning to being Belgian. For most of the respondents being Belgian implies a number of characteristics (often referring to stereotypes such as Belgian fries and chocolate). People can relate to it and have more or less an idea of what 'a Belgian' is, even abroad. Many pupils, however, say they do not really feel a deeper emotional connection by being Belgian.

"You feel Belgian because your passport says so. Automatically you are Belgian but otherwise..." (Sylvie, FG6)

A Belgian identity is seen as evident, something you receive automatically because you were born in Belgium. It seems like there is no deeper emotional attachment for many of the respondents. This, however, is not entirely true. The focus groups show that this Belgian identity is indeed not present all the time but arises/becomes stronger in certain contexts/interactions (e.g. sporting events). This confirms the theoretical hypothesis of the importance of context mentioned earlier (Bruter 2005). Most respondents claim to have some sort of attachment to being Belgian, although it is often mentioned that their Flemish identity is even stronger. It can be stated that their Belgian civic identity is thus considered as evident and obvious, while their cultural identity seems more context related. The pride in feeling connected with other Belgians only seems to come forward in certain situations/contexts.

The second phase of the focus groups concentrated on European identity and on how these young people perceive it. At the beginning of the focus group discussions, most of them stated they do not feel European. This may put the earlier survey findings in perspective. Although our quantitative analysis shows that 75 per cent of the pupils feel at least a small sense of belonging to the EU, the qualitative analysis shows that this does not mean the pupils spontaneously and openly present themselves as European when asked.

The pupils wonder what unites them as Europeans. And what is a European? They point out that these questions are very difficult to answer and thus make it more difficult to identify with the EU. Several pupils refer to the (mental) gap that still seems to exist with Eastern Europe as a first tripping block for identity formation. Some pupils even feel that Eastern Europe does not belong to Europe, it is too distant, too unknown. Following Mummendy and Waldzus' definitions, it can even be said that Eastern Europe is seen as the out group or 'the other' for some of the pupils (Mummendy and Waldzus 2004: 60).

Second, they feel that there is very little that really unites Europeans. Some joke that apart from the Eurovision song contest and the Champions League, there is nothing that could make them feel united. The EU is perceived as too distant from their daily lives and they hardly ever feel like citizens of the EU precisely because of its distant and unknown character. On the other hand, most pupils have a more or less clear idea of what 'a Belgian' is (even though this might be based on stereotypes). These kind of preset ideas seem completely absent on the European level.

Third, many respondents see the benefits of the EU (e.g. Euro, open borders) as evident but do not (explicitly) link this to the EU. This illustrates the limits of the instrumental theories that claim that more EU benefits will automatically result in more people identifying with the EU. These three observations also show that there are still many hurdles on the path of identity formation. This does not imply that there are no signs of

a European identity to be found in the discourses of the pupils. Again context and situation play an important role (like in the context of a Belgian identity).

"It depends on the circumstances. If you travel through different countries, for instance, if you go to Spain via France, then you feel part of Europe. You can simply continue driving. If you get in contact with different nationalities from outside of Europe, it is also easier to say that you are European." (Thijs, FG5)

"It depends on who you are talking to. When I am talking to a Walloon, I'll say I'm Flemish. To a Frenchman I'll say I'm Belgian, but to an American I'll say I'm European." (Hannah, FG3)

These observations illustrate that context may evoke a culturally inspired identity. It also shows that looking at European identity is not so much a matter of answering the question whether it exists or not, but more a matter of what it constitutes and when or where it might arise.

Civic and cultural symbols

By using civic/cultural symbols insight was gained into what these symbols mean to the pupils and if they can relate (and potentially identify) to them in any way. It quickly became clear, however, that the civic/cultural distinction could not be strictly interpreted. Bruter defines certain symbols as civic or cultural, but the interpretation the respondents gave, did not always coincide with that vision. Bruter himself has already indicated the double role symbols can play. This is illustrated by the fact, that the as civic defined Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, is sometimes given a cultural interpretation by the respondents. The same thing can be said of the interpretation of the (civic) European flag. The added value of these focus groups is, however, that they show what specific contexts, within which these young people give meaning to these symbols on both the cultural and civic level, are at play.

For a first indication of a civic identity component, the pictures of José Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission and Javier Solana, the Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union, were shown to the respondents. The results clearly show that these politicians are fairly unknown which indicates the invisibility and the lack of familiar faces of the EU. This makes it harder for them to identify with the EU and hinders the creation of a civic political identity. The second civic symbol presented, is the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. This can be regarded as the civic symbol par excellence since it defines the core of the EU. Most pupils are positive towards the idea of a constitution but interpret its potential role differently. The majority of the respondents give the civic intended symbol indeed a more civic definition. It is seen as a next step towards more political unity, a way of getting more security and certainty and it could enable the EU to play a bigger role on the world stage, but this civic symbol sometimes also gets a cultural interpretation. It would be something that could unite us, Europeans, according to several pupils. Some pupils even give a culturally based argumentation to reject the notion of a European constitution, saying that this would only lead to cultural loss. The European anthem is used as an indicator of a cultural identity component. A lot of the pupils did not know the EU had an anthem, let alone they knew which one. The idea of a European anthem is, however, not completely rejected; the respondents see it as a symbol that could increase feelings of unity. A European anthem seems to receive its more cultural intended meaning.

European and national/regional counterparts: compatible or in competition?

In the last phase of the focus groups, the relation between European identity and its non-European counterparts was discussed. The analysis shows that non-European

identities are stronger present in the minds of our respondents than its European counterpart. This feeling can be illustrated by the following quote (a response on how they would feel if the EU flag was set on fire): "It would be shocking, but it would have more impact if it would be a Belgian or a Flemish flag." A second example can be found in their response to the idea of a European anthem. The anthem, as such, is being positively perceived, but it remains a delicate thing to play such a song after the Belgian anthem (e.g. on a sporting event). This indicates a more emotional attachment to being Belgian than these pupils stated earlier. Other events with a clear European context were found more appropriate (e.g. official gatherings of the Council of the European Union, or big European events, such as '50 years Treaty of Rome') to play this song.

The pupils also think in layers when it comes to their identity. Most of them feel foremost Flemish or Belgian (often first Flemish and then Belgian) and then European. Feeling European is mostly seen as the most distant identity form. It is important to point out that identities are compatible and should not be seen as in competition with one another.

The pupils do acknowledge the possibility of multiple identities. An idea also supported in many theoretical writings (Cerutti 1992; Weiler 1999; Risse 2001). European identity and its national/regional counterparts are not a matter of one *or* the other, but a matter of the one *and* the other. Both identities can exist side by side. That one might be stronger than the other is a theoretical idea (identities are nested) that is thus supported by the findings of other research studies (Risse 2004: 250; Ruiz Jiminez *et al.* 2004: 10).

Conclusion

The main aim of this article is to examine how Flemish young people perceive the EU, if they potentially identify themselves with it and if there is any relation between image of the EU and feelings of belonging to the EU. Although the theoretical literature on identity and identity formation is extensive, its empirical back-up remains rather rare. Therefore, this article aims to shed further empirical light on a predominantly theoretical discussion.

A combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches is, ideally, required to research European identity. This research article has tried to meet those requirements by using a primarily qualitative research design, complemented with a basic quantitative approach, based on a short survey, to study this topic. In further research, however, the research survey could be more comprehensive by, for example, using more questions, a larger sample size, and different countries. This would further broaden the understanding of European identity.

The findings confirm several theoretical principles. First, they underline the importance of contexts and situations in the arising of identities. A European identity is not always present, but rather arises in certain contexts or situations and receives mostly a more cultural interpretation.

Second, this article confirms the theoretical thesis of multiple identities. It is not about choosing one or the other. It is possible for different identities to exist side by side. This does, however, not mean that both identities are equally strong. The students expressed their preferences and hereby confirmed the thesis of nestedness/concentric circles (the inner circle is the strongest identity form, the outer circle is the weakest one) (Risse 2004: 250). European identity constitutes for most of the respondents the outer circle.

Third, this article states that the division between a cultural and civic identity component, as used by Bruter, is not absolute. It is hard and almost impossible to see one element without the other. This was illustrated by the meaning given to cultural/civic symbols by these young people. Their interpretation was clearly not unanimously cultural *or* civic and shows how symbols can play a double role. Based on these findings, it is also clear that there is no such thing as one European identity shared by all, just as there is no single national identity shared by everyone. The identity form is given its own interpretation by each individual (rather civic or cultural or both).

This article sheds a critical light on the conceptualization of European identity, more specifically the idea that one should distinguish a civic and cultural component of European identity. Although the study underlines the value of this divide on a theoretical level, as it makes it possible to surpass the deadlock of cultural versus civic theories, it also shows that the two components are not easily researchable and that further research is needed on how to translate the concept empirically.

On a more empirical level, this research has three focus points. First, it gives more insight into the image the EU has for Flemish young people by using a metaphor analysis. The pupils were asked to compare the EU to an animal and explain why. On the basis of their responses, seven trends can be discerned that give an overview of the different images existing of the EU. These images are fairly positive, with only few comparisons that are fully negative. The trends found, refer to the EU's cooperative nature, its diversity or its flexibility.

Second, the article also looks at what links can be found between images of the EU on the one hand and the level of sense of belonging on the other hand. It was found that particularly the pupils who see the EU as something big and powerful and the ones who pride the EU for its cooperative nature, are the ones claiming to have the highest level of sense of belonging. Almost 75 per cent of the respondents state they feel at least a little sense of belonging. This high percentage has to be put into perspective, however, since the qualitative analysis shows that pupils are not very keen on presenting themselves as European when asked directly. Looking back at the definition of European identity employed by this article, this indicates a rather low psychological existence of the community.

Third, this article distinguishes, based on the focus group discussions, several pitfalls that complicate the process of European identity formation. First of all, there still seems to exist a (mental) gap with Eastern Europe which supports the idea of Mummendey and Waldzus (2004) of the importance of out-group and in-group referencing. Eastern Europe is hereby seen as belonging to the out-group for several respondents. Second, the lack of knowledge and the distant, unknown character of the EU render the identity process more difficult. Third, it is apparently very hard for the respondents to get an idea of what 'being a European' should mean. And fourth, for several students different benefits of the EU (e.g. Euro, open borders) are seen as self-evident and are no longer explicitly linked to the EU, This research finding puts the basic principles of instrumental theories into question. Overall, the results of this article suggest that there is still a long way to go for the EU to find its place in the hearts and minds of young Europeans.

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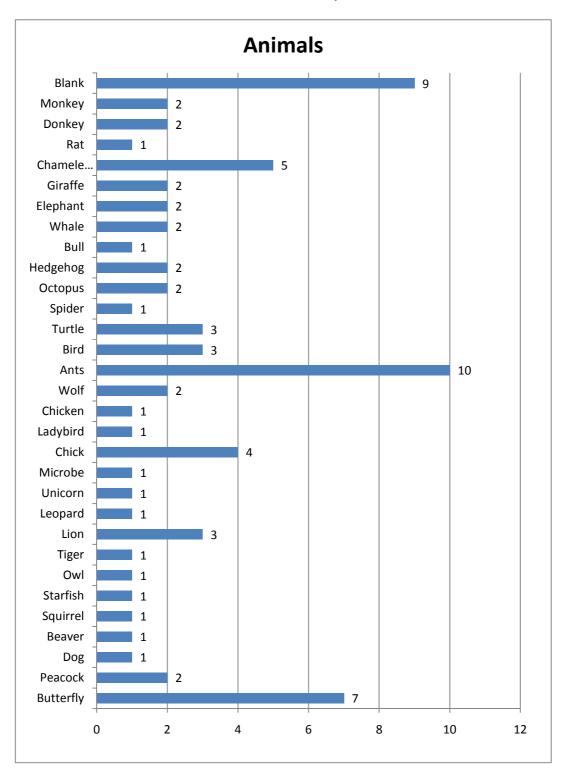
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Annex 1: List of animal names used in short survey



Annex 2: sense of belonging - image of the EU

Sense of belonging	TNSB*	NSB	LSB	SB	SSB	VSB	Blank	Total (N)
Image EU								
Trend Diversity	0	3	5	0	2	0		10
Trend Development	0	2	4	1	0	0		7
Trend Little	1	2	2	4	1	0		10
Trend Big	1	0	6	4	2	0		13
Trend Flexible	0	2	1	2	0	0		5
Trend Cooperation	0	2	8	3	1	0		14
Trend Unknown	0	1	3	0	0	0		4
Negative	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	4
Blank/Missing Data	2	2	3	0	1	1		9
Total	5	15	33	14	7	1	1	76

 $^{^{*}}$ Abbreviations are used. TNSB = Totally no sense of belonging; NSB = No sense of belonging; LSB = Little sense of belonging; SB = Sense of belonging; SSB = Strong sense of belonging; VSB = Very strong sense of belonging