**GERMANY**

David RZEPKA

*Can the citizens of Europe not have two sides, just like a euro? Can identification with your home country and shared European values not be flip sides of the very same coin? How we answer this question will define Europe’s citizen of the future. It also calls for a long search for a common European identity.*

**In search of identity**

On my seventh birthday, I received a gift: an album made of thick blue cardboard. Opening it – with my bright blue eyes reflecting the colour of that cardboard – I saw small paper discs that could be removed from the page, leaving ideally sized portholes for a set of coins. It was a one-euro-coin collector’s album, sorted by the thirteen countries that were the very first to participate in the European monetary union. With great enthusiasm, I began sorting through the change my parents received at cafés – like a hog digging for truffles, constantly looking for the symbols of different countries.

Today, I look at one euro coins with an entirely different fascination. All of them have a common reverse. They portray a map of Europe that symbolises the formation of a political union on the European continent. The obverse, however, is different. That is where each country can showcase its identity, and it is where Europe’s diversity and the individual characteristics of each country come to the fore. We Europeans are diverse; we’re different.

*Different but equal.*

“Now that’s where the contradiction lies,” people cry out across the continent, maintaining that Europeanisation brings with it a loss of identity of individual countries. Others say that scaling back Europe will only promote differences and deepen rifts between the countries. But can the citizens of Europe not have two sides, just like a euro? Can identification with your home country and shared European values not be flip sides of the very same coin?
How we answer this question will define Europe’s citizen of the future. It also calls for a long search for a common European identity.

But can such a common identity even exist on a continent that is home to such great diversity? Contradictory mentalities, traditions, and even definitions of essential European concepts – such as democracy – have divided present-day Europe into camps. The continent and its inhabitants are split over issues like guests overstaying their welcome, but also, and more importantly, significant questions relating to social policy. Over issues that can be resolved and others that are supposedly unsolvable. Cold War bogeymen are re-emerging. Even I as a child of the 2000s, sometimes get the impression that the old blocs have not yet been fully overcome. In the world of diplomacy, “*ors”* are everywhere. “Russia *or* the US” comes up in discussions on the EU, and we hear “Russia *or* the EU” when talk turns to Ukraine. What we urgently need are “*ands”*, in addition to ridding ourselves of old bogeymen and reinvigorating multilateralism. The idea of multilateralism has already come under fire by the Trump administration. So isn’t it high time for us Europeans to step onto the scene?

Merely observing international policy won’t be enough – it will only give us a stiff neck. Rather, Europeans themselves must change so that political transformation can take place. That’s exactly when shared identity becomes key. The journalist Rainer Bonhorst cuts to the chase in his article published in the Augsburger Allgemeine newspaper in 2007. In an essay titled “What it means to be European”[[1]](#footnote-1), he concludes that what distinguishes Europe from the rest of the world is its “culture of freedom” – a freedom that has its origins in how Europeans view themselves and how they are viewed by people on other continents. But where can that freedom be found today? Are values such as human rights, democracy and the rule of law so firmly rooted here that we can rightly claim they are a pan-European phenomenon? The honest truth is that we can’t – but, then again, maybe all we need to do is dig a little deeper.

European history, after all, has shaped our identities. After the end of the Second World War, and at the very latest with the end of the confrontation between East and West, every European should be profoundly aware that this history must never again be repeated. Europe, the cradle of democracy, needs cooperation between the different countries on the continent. If one assumes that this awareness (or subconscious knowledge) is present throughout Europe, then the European citizen of the future would only need to be reminded of all these things. That generally describes the attitude in Western Europe after the Second World War – in particular with regard to the founding of the European Economic Area and, later, the European Union and the long process of European integration. However, as the decades passed, this attitude seems to have slipped ever more into the unconscious – albeit not without occasional wake-up calls across Europe. High voter participation during this year’s European elections is one example; it led to gains not among nationalists, but rather mostly by liberal and green parties. Russia, too, in 2010 proposed “the creation of a harmonious economic community stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok”[[2]](#footnote-2). Although that call primarily aimed to spur economic collaboration, it does show that there is a willingness in Eastern Europe to promote cooperation in Europe – including a common identity among European citizens.

In Europe, a willingness to cooperate may not be fully manifest, but it is part and parcel of the European intellectual tradition. So how can future generations of Europe’s citizens be motivated to cooperate? The future citizen of Europe *will* cooperate, and he or she *will* want to safeguard and promote the rule of law, human dignity and democracy. However, he or she will do so only if it is clear who exactly constitutes Europe. The mere concept of Europe, a general interest in cooperation and the simple determination to fill in the trenches of the Second World War and heal the divides of the Cold War will not be enough. What is needed is exchange. Exchange that can teach people what Europe is. Europe is the people who live there – not its institutions, not its parliament and not its politicians. People must engage in dialogue. Thanks to an exchange between my town of Villingen-Schwenningen and the Russian industrial city of Tula, I learned much about the Russian point of view – without necessarily adopting it. Instead of letting the political differences between European countries hold us back, projects like this one, no matter how small they may be, create opportunities to get to know and understand one another. The same can be said for educational trips, town twinnings, joint historical projects, including work at memorial sites as part of the culture of remembrance, and student exchanges. Here, much is already being achieved through the Erasmus programme. However, more must be done to promote exchange between countries that have significant political and cultural differences, in particular in Eastern and Western Europe. Through such projects, it will become clear to the future citizen of Europe that having equality does not mean surrendering difference and diversity – in a nutshell, they will see that strength lies in precisely this dualism. Similarly, a European with a clear sense of solidarity will help drive political and economic cooperation. This, in turn, will increase interdependence among countries - which itself is a telling indicator of peace. The future citizen of Europe will know the value of peace, and attaining it will be at the very core of his or her identity: different but equal in striving for peace.

1. Bonhorst, Rainer, „Was es heißt, Europäer zu sein“, in: https://augsburger-allgemeine.de/politik/Was-es-heisst-Europaeer-zu-sein-id3284796.html [21.12.2007], zuletzt geprüft: 30.05.2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Vgl. Gastbeitrag von Wladimir Putin „Von Lissabon bis Wladiwostok“, in: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/putin-plaedoyer-fuer-wirtschaftsgemeinschaft-von-lissabon-bis-wladiwostok-1.1027908> [25.11.2010], zuletzt geprüft: 30.05.2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)