Europe, imagined

Dilemmas of European identity

by

Boglárka Koller[1]

For a long time Europe's history and the history of nations were interwoven. European politics, philosophy, art and the 'way of life' all reflect the national pasts. From the 19th century up until recent years, national identity had a peculiar and superior place among the collective attachments of individuals. However, with the beginning of European integration, the opportunity of a supranational identification was born. The 'every-days' of European nations are determined by the legal, institutional and economic structures that were created by the integration. However, as the voices of Euroskepticism from time to time indicate, these structures do not always prove to be sufficient at keeping the supranational community together. Only Europeans can keep the European Union together. Only their strong attachment to the supranational community and their active participation in the Union's affairs can legitimize the existence of a supranational political community. But what kind of collective attachments do the European citizens have and how can these attachments be described? Will the supranational identity be formed in the same way as national identities were formed in the past?

In this paper, I will sum up the results of my research on the identities of EU citizens by discussing four topics. Firstly, I will recall the ethno-symbolist and constructivist debate of the theories of nations and nationalism in an attempt to search for an answer to the question whether common ethnic roots, symbols and myths are necessary to establish a strong collective identity or can the leading elites construct it? Secondly, I will discuss the various interpretations of multiple identities and explain the social dynamics of identity building in Europe. The debate on cultural or civic basis of European identification will be the third topic that I include. To sum up, I will write about the consequences of the heterogeneity of the EU population on the collective identities of individuals. I acknowledge that other questions could legitimately be included in this study, but the word limit imposed on the paper limited my work to these selected topics.

[1] *The author is an associate professor at King Sigismund College, Budapest, Institute of International and Political Studies*

The underlying theoretical assumption of the paper is that in order to understand the nature of European identity, it should be analysed from two angles. On the one hand it is a top-down process, thus the European identity is a construction of the European elites that try to find the lost (or never fully won) consent of people to the project of common Europe. On the other hand, it is not a mere construction, because the signs of the bottom-up processes, signs of an 'ongoing socialization process' can be detected in Europe by which actors continuously internalize the values and norms of the community and acquire new loyalties. (Risse, 2004:3) Although there is a double dynamic, i.e. top-down efforts and bottom-up initiatives at the same time, it is obvious that these two forces do not necessarily act in the same direction and a gap can be identified between the efforts made by the EU in order to establish the common identity and how European citizens form their identities in their every-days.

Constructing European identity

Since the 19th century nations have not only been the major players in European politics and history, their existence also determined the direction and the nature of individuals' self-understanding. National identity occupied a privileged position in the hierarchy of individuals' collective identities. This position seems to be threatened by the recently established European identity that signifies individuals' attachment to a political community that is bigger than their national one. Nevertheless, while the formation of national identities can be interpreted in retrospect to centuries of history, European identity has a past of only a few decades.

European integration started as an elite driven project in the 1950s. Although it gained widespread support later among the European public, the role of the social and political elites in developing and running integration remained significant up until today.

European elites initiated the gradual establishment of European identity in the 1970s and since then the European Community has made great efforts to establish the legal and political framework, a common cultural policy as well as the symbols for the sake of a common identity. The Declaration on European Identity in 1973, the Tindemans report in 1976 and the Adonnino report in 1984 were all signs of an increased interest on the side of the Community to establish a direct link between the individuals and the Community, though it was not until the beginning of the 1990s when the concept became involved in the founding treaties of the Union. The Maastricht Treaty introduced the concept of 'Citizenship of the Union' in 1991. Article 8. declares that 'Every person holding the nationality of a Member State shall be a citizen of the Union'.[i] Although this Article declares that citizens have both rights and duties, the rights declared by the Treaty were very limited compared to the national citizenship concepts. Article 128. of the Maastricht Treaty furthermore states that 'The Community shall contribute to the flowering of the

cultures of the members states, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore.'[ii] The Union's ambition to support the establishment of a common identity can be seen in the later legal documents. The entire second chapter of the Amsterdam Treaty is dedicated to the 'Union and its Citizens'. The Charter of Fundamental Rights, accepted in Nice in 2000 represented another major step in establishing a direct link between the European Union and its citizens. Later, the Constitutional Treaty incorporated the whole Charter into the text, but it failed in 2005. The Lisbon Treaty, ratified in 2009 did not incorporate the Charter into the text, but made it legally binding by declaring that it has the same legal value as the Treaties.

Beyond the structural elements, the European Union strived to create the symbolic elements of the common identity. The blue flag with the golden stars 'representing the union of the peoples of Europe'; the anthem, Beethoven's 9th Symphony; 'Europe Day' on the 9th May; and the common currency, the Euro; all symbolise a sense of belonging to the EU.

As the above indicate, the European identity has many constructed elements, both structural and symbolic. The question is whether a constructed identity, like the European identity, could be loaded with sufficient real content to become a strong reference point for collective self-understanding of citizens or the pursuits of European Union to establish a common identification will end in failure. To answer this, we can recall the theoretical debate of ethno-symbolists and constructivists. Ethno-symbolists argue that a common ethnic past, myths, and symbols rooted in a shared history are necessary for successful nation-building, and through the popular memory these elements form the identities of individuals. Therefore, without a common ethnic past, identity formation cannot be successful (Smith, 1986 and Armstrong, 1982). For constructivists, national identity is 'an intellectual artefact'. Symbols and traditions are young creations. They argue that due to the pursuits of the leading elite 'entirely new symbols and devices came into existence: national anthem, national flag, personification of the nation', etc. (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).

Where we put our theoretical standpoint in this debate, determines what we say about the existence and the future of European identity. I argue that the constructivist approach is adequate for understanding European identity. Firstly, many structures in politics and society that were constructed by the leading elites and later became accepted and admired by the majority of the population. For example, the existence of the greatest French national holiday is due to the choice of the elite of the time. The republican delegates selected 14 July in 1880 to be the national holiday of France. Revolutionary days of 1830, 1848, 1870 were also options, but finally the delegates choose the day of demolishing the Bastille (Nora, 1996:119). Secondly, with the tools of mass-media and communication, construction of identities has become easier and faster.

It is enough to think about the diversity of communities in which we can obtain 'imagined' memberships (Anderson, 1991:6) that constantly reinterpret and redefine our identities.

Shifting loyalties

Up until this point, this study only considered the co-existence of national and European identities. However, as Risse rightly argues: 'It is wrong to conceptualize European identity in zero-sum terms, as if an increase in European identity necessarily decreases one's loyalty to national or other communities.' (Risse, 2004:4) Collective identities of Europeans can only be imagined in a more differentiated structure. For individuals, the immediate vicinity, the town or village where they live, the region, the county, the nation, the European Union and even the global sphere all signify one of their geographical attachments. Nevertheless, for a long time the prevalent opinion was held that there is a certain hierarchy between these collective allegiances and national identity has a peculiar and superior place among these attachments. (Pataki, 1986) The complex social, political and economic processes and the mass migration in the second half of the 20th century caused theorists to use multiple models to describe and interpret individuals' collective identities. Although the majority of theorists accept the concept of multiple identities, they differ in understanding its content. As Salazar claims, for example, aside from the most important national identity there are other 'nation-related identities' such as regionalism, stateless nationalism and supra-nationalism which constitute concentric circles of identities or, as he calls it after the Russian wooden doll, the 'matryoshka of identities'(Salazar, 1998). For him, there is a hierarchy between allegiances, and the national identity stands at the top of other identifications. Smith, talking about collective identities, emphasises that these are 'pervasive and persistent' and can be 'situational', but not completely 'optional'. Therefore 'national identification possesses distinct advantages over the idea of a unified European identity' (Smith, 1997:322-325). The Hungarian writer Konrád believes that currently individuals can freely choose among their attachments. He sees an analogy between the multi-layers of identities and a 'many-storey house' and argues that the individual's mind can as easily shift from one identity to another as we can visit different floors in a building (Konrád, 1997).

In my opinion, the self-understanding of Europeans can be best described by the post-national identity structure's identity-net model (Koller, 2006). This model not only indicates the multiple loyalties of individuals in contemporary Europe but also refers to functionalist, and neofuntionalist theories which argue that in line with the establishment of supranational institutions and new policy areas and due to the spill-over effect of integration, the European citizens' loyalties were transferred to new centres and their collective attachments became more differentiated (Haas, 1958).

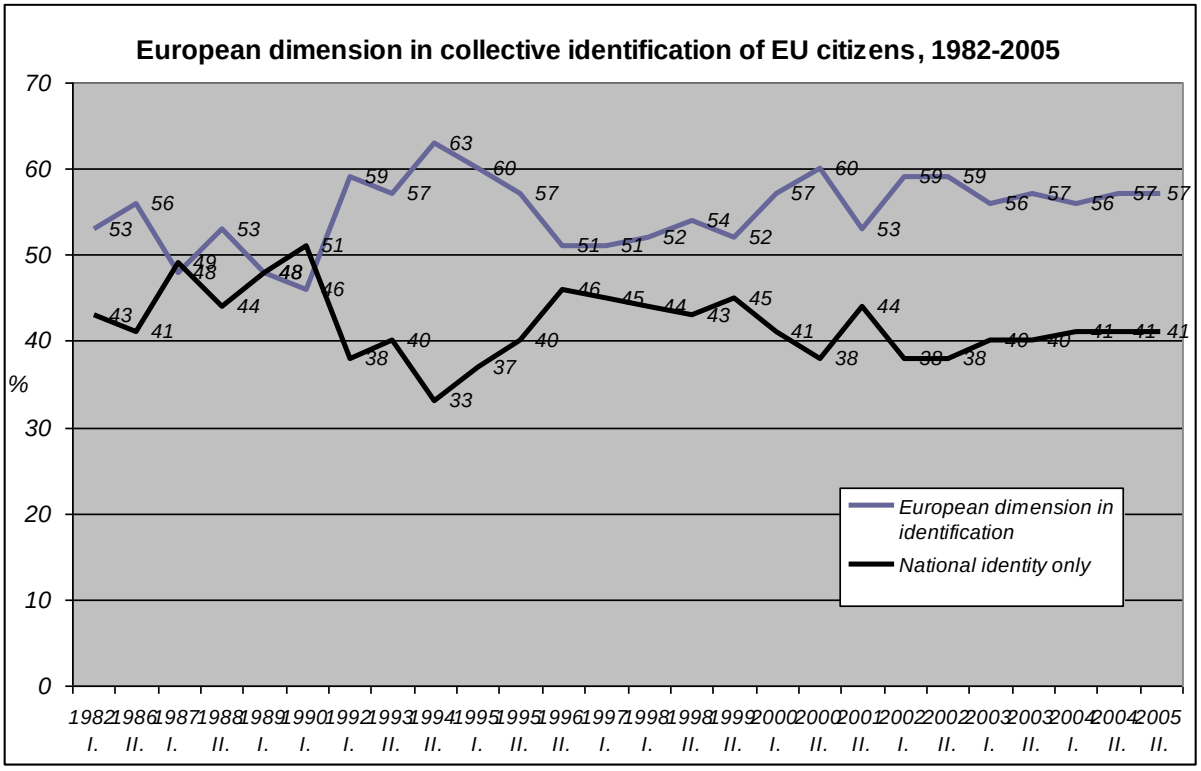
The identity-net indicates the dynamic co-existence of individuals' collective attachments and also includes the time dimension. Individuals regularly decide which aspect or junction of their identity-net they activate in their every-day lives. It can be imagined as a net made from Christmas tree lights. The lights at the junction points of the net light up alternatively. It may be that they shed more or less intense light in different time periods. It may also be that either many of them or only a few are sparkling. Applying that analogy, individuals are also capable of changing their collective attachments regularly as well as their respective ranking and intensity. In this model the subjects, boundaries, spheres, membership of the community, the process of identity formation, the inclusion and the categories of the 'otherness' differ from those of the ideal typical model of national identity.

To sum up, there is a double dynamic of the establishment of European identity. It is a construction of the EU elites, but also and outcome of the ongoing social process in which citizens gradually adapt and internalize new loyalties, values and symbols into their multiple attachments.

European dimension among the multiple-identities of Europeans

In order to demonstrate the validity of my theoretical assumptions, the result of the public opinion surveys should be analysed. According to the results of Eurobarometer (EB), the majority of Europeans feel attached to the European Union. However, the population is divided in this question: 57% of EU citizens feel themselves belonging to Europe to some extent, while 41% answered that they have only national identity.[iii]Namely, in spite of the constructed nature of European identity, the European dimension is an existing element of the multiple-identities of the majority of European citizens. However there is a significant share of the European population that have only national identity, which indicates that these individuals have not yet incorporated the new symbols, values and norms into their complex net of collective identities.

Based on the data of the standardised opinion polls, we also analysed how this collective identification changed from 1982 to 2005.[iv] Except for two periods – year 1987 and 1989-1992[v] – the majority of EU population expressed that they feel themselves to some extent belonging to Europe.



EB17, 26, 27, 30, 31, 33, 37, 40, 42, 43, 44, 46, 47, 49, 50, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 64

For the existence of multiple identities we can also find evidence in the surveys. As the results of a 2002 EB indicate, 90% of EU citizens feel attached to their country, 86% to their region, 87% to their village/town and 45% to Europe.[vi] While for the majority of EU citizens the attachment to their country ranks as the most important among other identities, regional and local attachments are of nearly equal importance for many.
Nevertheless, there are significant differences in this respect among the member states. In Germany for example, 89% of the citizens feel attached to their village or town and also 89% to the country, in Greece 94% of the citizens feel attached to the regions and the same ratio to the country, while in Belgium 86% of the citizens indicated their attachments to their region which was exactly the same percentage as in case of their attachment to the country. This demonstrates that in case of Europeans' collective identification, we must use more differentiated identity models which include local, regional, national and global levels as well. Moreover, it turned out from the results of the survey that the priority of national identity does not prevail in all cases any more.

Cultural or civic identification?

Looking back on European history, we can see that national identities can be built around two poles: around the cultural and ethnic communities or around the state. The first

means that national identity is defined by decent and cultural elements as common myths, symbols, language and customs, the second signifies that belonging to the political community is linked to a certain territory and manifested in citizens' rights and duties. In current nations, both have their relevance, and we do not find any European nation to date where only one pole dominates. However, as Friedrich Meinecke, Hans Kohn and Anthony D. Smith also point out, the two kinds of identification were not born at the same time in all European nations (Meinecke, 1969; Kohn, 1955; Smith, 1986). There were two nation-building models in Europe: the territorial and the ethnic/cultural nations. In the territorial model, the membership in the community is linked to a certain territory; the rights and duties are determined by the legal and institutional system. All citizens living in the territory are members in the community. France between 1789 and 1794 can be named as an example for this model. However, as Napoleon's conquests began, the French nation-state started to redefine itself. The territorial state's identity formation methods were extended by cultural and linguistic tools (Brubaker, 1992). Eugen Weber emphasized this change in his 'Peasants into Frenchman' (Weber, 1979) book and pointed out that France started to apply a wide range of cultural tools in order to form good French citizens from peasants. In Europe's other regions, for example in Central and Eastern Europe, the birth of a universal citizenship concept was preceded by the birth of a national identity which is defined by the ethnic, cultural and linguistic boundaries of the community and not tied to a certain territory. The territorial element of national identity was born at a later stage in these nations.

In the case of the European Union, there is no need to explain that there is no common ethnic past of the twenty-seven member states. The question of the existence of a common European culture cannot therefore, be easily answered. On the one hand, we can agree that western Christianity, humanism, renaissance, enlightment, democracy, capitalism, urban development, rule of law and human dignity are all parts of our 'Europeanness', as well as making the argument that Shakespeare, Beethoven, Picasso belong to our common European cultural heritage. However, we all know that the Irish and Catalan culture – both the high and the popular – are rather different than similar. There is a thin layer in our cultural heritage that we all share but there is a thick one where we are all different. Notwithstanding the efforts of numerous conferences and symposiums that try to collect the elements of a common cultural heritage, more examples can be found for our cultural diversity.

The civic pole in the identification is a more concrete element in the case of the EU. When the integration started with the Montanunio in 1950, it required only six states' sectoral cooperation. In 2010, it is a political and economic union of twenty-seven member states. Though the integration experienced many deepening and widening waves, it did not become a federal state. It is a supranational community where multi-layered, political, legal and institutional spheres live together and where powers and competences are

manifested at different layers.[vii] There are policy areas where supranationalism prevails, but there are others where member states preserve their sovereignty and where issues are decided according to the intergovernmental logic.

Will the cultural or the civic pole be the core of a European identification? Answers can be found in European opinion poll surveys. When in 1999, EU citizens were asked about the existence of a cultural identity shared by all Europeans, 49% of the citizens answered no, but 38% of the respondents could agree with the statement to some extent. Though the population is divided in this question, the majority of Europeans do not believe in a common culture based identity.[viii] Other attitude surveys had similar results. A 2005 EB survey indicated that 41% of EU citizens are afraid of the loss of national identity and culture within Europe.[ix] Thus, the EU rather symbolises cultural diversity than unity for Europeans.

When evaluating the existence of the civic pole in the European Union, the level of trust in European and national institutions should be analysed. With regard to political institutions, as a 2002 EB survey indicates, trust in EU institutions is in general higher than in national ones. For example, while only 42% of the respondents trusted their national parliaments, 54% trusted the European Parliament. In the same year, 47% trusted the European Commission, 41% the Council, but only 39% trusted their national government.[x] According to a 2005 EB survey, 45% of the European citizens trust the European Union, 35% their national parliament and 31% their national government.[xi]

To sum up, while there are different political and institutional structures at national and European levels, the surveys demonstrate that the hierarchy of national structures does not prevail any more. European citizens become part of the supranational community through their participation in the EU's affairs.

Inclusion of 'others'

We form our identities in the process of comparing ourselves to 'others'. But defining who are the 'others' for Europeans is not so easy any more. All the twenty-seven member states' population is heterogenic and the number of people not belonging to the dominant nations is growing. Minorities, immigrants, foreign citizens live permanently in EU member states, therefore citizenship and allegiances to the state do not tell too much about people's identities. Meeting the others is an everyday experience of EU citizens; however, there are significant differences between member states in this respect. While for example in Portugal there are not minorities in considerable numbers, and Portuguese only meet others in the persons of immigrants in the neighbour country, Spain, minority issues are at the centre of domestic politics and the whole state structure was redesigned in order to satisfy minorities' demands. Migration does not affect all the twenty-seven member states

in the same way either. In 2003, 83% of all the migration to the European Union was directed towards four member states: Spain, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom and in general, it can be stated that the in 2004 and 2007 joined countries[xii] are less targeted by migrants than the fifteen original member states.[xiii] Although the different member states have established different structures for the inclusion of minority and immigrant individuals, meeting the 'others' constitute a constant challenge to Europeans' identity formation. According to a 2000 survey, the tolerance towards minorities and immigrants is in general, at a high level among the Europeans, however, there are differences between people's attitudes to minorities and immigrants. Tolerance is lower towards immigrants than minorities and it is higher if it is about matters of principle than practical issues, for example, when individuals feel that their own economic status, social conditions might be endangered.[xiv]

Europeans do not only meet the 'others' within their own country. Due to waves of enlargement, they regularly have to include newcomers, citizens of newly accessed countries who formerly were the 'others' in their identification processes. This process is neither easy for the population of the old member states nor the individuals of the newly joined countries. European Union is a political community of constantly changing borders, therefore individuals constantly have to re-define and re-evaluate their identities and the categories of otherness always gain new interpretations in this process.

The attitude of Europeans towards citizens of newly accessed countries is similar to the attitude to minorities and immigrants. Europeans support enlargement when it is interpreted as the EU's better position in world politics, or the cultural enrichment due to a bigger Union, however when it is explained in economic terms and they feel that the they may have to share their labour market with newcomers, the level of support immediately falls.[xv] It also has a consequence that the support of the enlargement is higher, when states with similar economic development join the EU, thus if individual does not feel that his or her personal economic situation endangered by the enlargement.

Conclusion

In items of its structural and symbolic elements, European identity is a constructed identity, but as I have shown through a discussion of the ethnosymbolist-constructivist debate, national identities also have many constructed elements. Thus, the fact that the European Union as a political community lacks roots in the past similar to those of nations does not mean that this constructed supranational identity cannot be loaded with real content and become a strong reference point for individuals' collective self-understanding. In fact, as it was argued later, the establishment of European identity can also be viewed as a bottom-up process, in which individuals incorporate the new values and symbols into their multiple attachments and develop a new set of loyalties.

As it was demonstrated by the empirical data: the majority of Europeans have already built in the 'European dimension' into their collective identities. Nevertheless there is still an important minority (approx. 40% of the citizens) that is not part of this process and for whom the national identity bears of utmost importance. As the examination of the cultural and civic basis of identification indicated, European identity is more civic than culturally based. We Europeans have a thin layer in our cultural heritage that we all share but there is a thick one where we are all different, a thesis supported by the EB results. Europeans become part of the supranational community through practising their political and civil rights and not by sharing a common culture. The multiple identity theories were supported by the surveys too, indicating that local, regional, European and even global levels can be of the same or even greater significance than that of the national level. Nevertheless, what makes this identity formation constantly challenged in Europe is the always-changing interpretation of the 'otherness'.

References

ANDERSON, Benedict (1991): Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Revised Edition, Verso.

ARMSTRONG, John A. (1982): Nations before Nationalism. The University of North Carolina Press.

BRUBAKER, Rogers (1992): Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany. University Press, Cambridge, Massachuttes.

HAAS, Ernst B. (1958): The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social and Economic Forces 1950-57, Stanford University.

HOBSBAWM, Eric & RANGER (1983), Terence: Invention of Tradition. Cambridge University Press

HOOGHE, Liesbet and MARKS, Gary (2001): Multi-level Governance and European Integration. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Oxford.

KOHN, Hans (1955): Nationalism, Its Meaning and History. D. Van Nostrand Company.

KOLLER Boglárka (2006): Nemzet, identitás és politika Európában. (Nations, identity and politics in Europe), L'Harmattan Kiadó, Budapest.

KONRÁD, György (1997): A sok emeletes tudat. Európai Szemle, VII. évf., 1997/3.

MEINECKE, Friedrich (1969): Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat. Studien zu der Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaates. Oldenburg Verlag, München.

NORA, Pierre (1996): Realms of Memory. Rethinking the French Past Vol. III: Symbols. Columbia University Press, 1996.

PATAKI Ferenc (1986): Identitás, személyiség, társadalom. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest.

RISSE, Thomas (2004): Neo-functionalism, European Identity and the Puzzles of European Integration. Center for Transatlantic Foreign and Security Policy. Otto Suhr Institute of Political Sciences, 2004.

SALAZAR (1998), Jose Miguel: Social Identity and National Identity. In WORCHEL, S., MORALES J.F., PAEZ, D., DESCHAMPS, J.C. (eds.): Social Identity. SAGE Publications, London.

SMITH, Anthony D. (1982): The Ethnic Origins of Nations. Blackwell, Oxford, 1986. and ARMSTRONG, John A.: Nations before Nationalism. The University of North Carolina Press.

SMITH, Anthony D.(1997): National Identity and the Idea of European Unity. In GOWAN, Peter and ANDERSON, Perry (eds.): The Question of Europe, Verso.

WEBER, Eugen (1979): Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernisation of Rural France, 1870-1914. Chatto and Windus, London.

Notes

i Maastricht Treaty, Official Journal, C 191, 29/07/1992

ii Maastricht Treaty, Official Journal, C 191, 29/07/1992

iii EB 64

iv In the 1982-1992 EB surveys, the following question was asked: 'Do you ever think of yourself as not only Nationality, but also European? Does this happen often (a), sometimes (b) or never (c)'? In the 1992-2005 EB surveys the following question was asked: 'In the near future do you see yourself as .....? Four answers were possible: Nationality only (1), (Nationality) and European (2), European and (Nationality) (3), European only (4).' I created two categories from the above answers: one where the European dimension is involved in collective identification of the individual (a and b for the 1st question and 2-4 for the 2nd) and another where it is missing and people have only national identity (c for the 1st question and 1 for the 2nd). It is crucial to remark that this kind of categorisation is only to demonstrate the tendencies and should not be regarded as numerical comparisons.

v This could be explained by both internal – strengthened Euroskepticism around the deepening issues of integration at the end of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s – and external factors – collapse of communism, Gulf war etc. – but the provision of a thorough explanation would exceed the word limits of the paper.

vi EB 57

vii This is described by the by the MLG (multi-level governance) models. See Hooghe Liesbet and Marks Gary (2001)

viii EB 50

ix EB 64

x EB 57

xi EB 64

xii The ten countries joined in 2004 and Romania and Bulgaria joined in 2007.

xiii Eurostat Yearbook 2005, p. 76.

xiv EB Special Reports 138

xv EB 58