

# LANGUAGE VS ETHNICITY VS NATIONALISM IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

---

Prazauskas Algimantas, Vytautas Magnus University

Language is part of ethnic identity, and ethnic identity in many cases, especially in Eastern and Central Europe, where ethnic nationalism is the prevailing form of nationalism, constitutes an integral part of nationalism (its other part consists of national interests as perceived by dominant groups and/or the majority). However, in the context of regional inegration, the relationship between these categories undergoes a major change alongside with shifts in the identity structure. In his analysis of international systems, Stuart J.Kaufman noted that, depending upon prevailing types of polity, different types of loyalties become prevalent, viz. local, personal, imperial, and national (Kaufman 1997).

Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century numerous supraethnic types of political identities and allegiances have emerged, whose future at the present stage is unpredictable, irrespective of all the efforts of social engineering. Thus, policies of constructing Soviet, Yugoslav or Cypriot supraethnic identities failed and the respective states disintegrated, while Indian, Philipino, and Indonesian identities, with certain reservations and exceptions, seem to be successful cases of identity construction – largely due to the crucial circumstance that the success of nation-building efforts depends upon the cultural compatibility of components, i.e. ethnic groups, their past relations, and other factors. In any case, the emergence of supranational regional

identities is both a political project of social engineering, and an objective process determined by sociocultural and economic processes, particularly under the impact of regional integration and as responses to the challenges of globalization. In a sense, the foundation and growth of universal regional organizations (especially the EU, ASEAN, Arab League) may be interpreted as civilizational responses to the process of globalization.

This kind of discourse is likely to evoke suspicions about the reification of such categories like civilization or the greater cultural tradition, core, and periphery. However, despite the prevalence of postmodernist approaches, sufficient empirical work has been done on these issues during the last few decades and the discussion stands on fairly firm foundations. Today, the issues of regional or civilizational identity, and its relationship with ethnicity or national identities have become topical not only in philosophical debate, but also in sociological research, mass media and policy planning.

This is particularly true for European identity, which has become a topical and rather confusing issue. At the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in 2002 one of the central issues on the agenda was “European Identity: Simply a Myth or Something in the Making?” The very term *identity* is used in many senses. Politicians and experts talk about defence, political, cultural identity, the contents of European citizenship. In this paper, identity means the subjective sense of belonging to a certain group. The fortunes of European identity to a large extent are shaped by the interface of the language, ethnicity, and nationalism triad along with political, economic and other factors. Obviously, it is far beyond the scope of a brief paper to examine all aspects of the subject matter, so my aim is limited to sharing some observations and reflections on the issue.

### **Theoretical assumptions**

The fashionable neo-Marxist (or rather basic Marxist) constructivist approach interprets identity as the result of social engineering by elites (or the emerging ‘petty bourgeoisie’ in Marxist idiom). According to Ernest Gellner, «[n]ationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist» (Gellner 1964: 169). The constructivist approach probably reached its apex with the statement that “ethnicity and nationalism [...] are social and political constructions, creations of elites, who draw upon, distort, and sometimes fabricate materials

from cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to protect their well-being or existence or to gain political and economic advantage for their groups as well as for themselves” (Brass 1991: 18). Curiously enough, Paul Brass, the author of this passage mentions groups, who already exist but are not connected to ethnicity. The problem becomes chicken-and-egg issue.

That social engineering is a major factor in shaping identities is fairly obvious and this conclusion can be supported by vast empirical data from the history of any nation. However, the constructivist approach cannot offer an adequate explanation of why identity-building efforts succeed in many cases but fail or are not undertaken at all in most other cases, e.g. why no nations emerge in the Hindi belt of India, comprising at least 200,000,000 inhabitants or in some areas of Africa. Why, among thousands of ethnic elites worldwide, have only several dozens strives to carve out new polities in order to achieve tangible advantages? More balanced approach makes it clear that culture, history, geography and other factors set very narrow limits for identity construction (up till the late twentieth century mostly in the form of nation-building).

Much confusion in discussing identity is caused by the fact that identity of each person has a specific – and strictly speaking – unique and dynamic structure, consisting of components related to membership in, or identification with different groups (family, peers, professional, ethnic, national, supranational, etc.). The ethnic (or national in many cases) component in its turn has its own structure. Thus, ethnic or national identity comprises sets of symbols: cultural (including language), historical (generally mythologized fragments of the national history), self-images and stereotypes of neighbouring groups, natural symbols of the homeland (rivers, mountains, climate, etc.). All this adds up to form the “we – they” distinction.

Except for isolated groups, typically there is a supraethnic or supranational component – in most cases identification with a greater cultural tradition (Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Confucian, continental). Like the (ethno)national, this component, too, consists of a number of cultural, historical, geographical and other symbols. Over the whole of Europe, ancient Greek (and, less so, Roman) history is regarded as the beginnings of European history, and there are numerous events that add up to form a common European history within the borders of the present day European Union. The Latin language during the Middle Ages, architectural, literary, artistic styles and dress fashions were essentially pan-European despite the imperial (Russia, Ottoman Empire) borders and the Cold War cleavage. Certainly,

contents and importance considered, European identity for virtually all Europeans was and remains less important than national identity, but so was the national identity compared to local loyalties some 150-200 years ago.

Although quite clear at the first glance, since the vast majority of the population of every region is aware of its confessional affinity and geographical location, this supranational regional component of identity tends to become elusive in the process of closer examination. The territorial boundaries of the greater tradition in many cases are blurred, and what is more or less clear is the notion of core and periphery, the latter often merging into what may be called grey strips, combining the elements of each of the neighbouring civilizations in different proportions (e.g. Tartars and Bashkirians in Russia, Azeris and other Muslim groups in the Caucasus). One important consequence is that significant sections of the population of such grey regions, even if they are ethnically homogeneous, hold divided attitudes towards the great cultural traditions. Another consequence is the incompatibility of the aspirational supraethnic identity and the ascribed status as perceived by the core regions. For example, the Tartars of Russia may look not sufficiently Muslim from the point of view of orthodox Arab or Iranian Muslims, and nor quite European from the West European viewpoint. To put it briefly, each periphery needs to be examined carefully before any safe conclusions about its identity can be made.

### **European identity – with reservations**

Numerous opinion polls and surveys confirm that an increasing numbers of Europeans do identify in one way or another with Europe, and claim to have some kind of European identity (Wintle 2005). Virtually every person of European origin, or born in Europe, has a European component within his or her identity structure, although the national identity component remains by far more significant.

However, the relevance of this type of continental identity varies vary widely in the case of particular nations, strata, and individuals. The staff members of pan-European organizations (EU, Council of Europe, OSCE), dealing daily with the European issues, definitely have a European outlook, or rather consider themselves being *the* Europe (“L’Europe, c’est nous”), bearing in this respect a striking resemblance to nationalist elites and bureaucracy at the early stages of nation-building. Similarly, the sense of

belonging to Europe (or European aspirational identity) varies widely in case of particular nations. For example, for the Poles, their 'Europeanness' and sense of being the bridgehead of Latin Christendom was an issue of supreme importance at least since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. In Lithuania, the main task for the nascent nationalist movement was resistance to Polonization, and the question of belonging to Europe virtually did not exist till the reemergence of the independent state after World War I<sup>1</sup>. Generally, the spread of nationalism during the nineteenth century, being a logical conclusion to the Westphalian international system, eroded much of European cultural cohesion which had been common to the educated strata since the medieval period. Along with its positive content, each nationalism carried a strong 'anti-' component, a negative attitude to powerful neighbours and political or cultural rivals. Thus, Czech, Hungarian, Latvian and a number of other nationalisms in Central and Eastern Europe were essentially anti-German, Polish nationalism in addition was expressly anti-Russian, Slovak nationalism anti-Hungarian, Central and East European nationalisms anti-Semitic, and so on, reflecting the power, and minority-majority realities and the specific cases of ethnic stratification of the period.

A specific obstacle to the formation of a European identity is the existence of continental or regional ethnic stratification, both as a sociological fact related to economic and cultural development, and a ranking on the basis of stereotypes. Political correctness aside, the existence of a five or six-rank hierarchy of nations does exist in Europe, bearing an analogy with WASP, Catholic, and Afro-American ethnic stratification in the U.S. several decades ago. As a consequence, the 'core' nations, or the 'Old' Europe, despite the intense propaganda about liberal multiculturalism, find it difficult to accept the European periphery, or the 'New' Europe, on strictly equal terms. And why should they, seeing the obvious differences of life style, behavior patterns, work habits and consumption patterns?

The eastern and south-eastern European cultural boundaries are hard to determine. Russians living in the Far East, with China, Korea and Japan next door, generally tend to identify themselves as Europeans, maybe as Europeans with a difference, but in any case not belonging to the Islamic, Buddhist or Confucian cultural traditions. Closer to the European core,

<sup>1</sup> A Lithuanian author wrote in 1932: "It would be very healthy for us to Europeanize for at least ten years... We have two homelands, one is Lithuania, another is Europe. Both of them are equally our own, equally dear". Jonas Aistis. *Milfordo gatvės elegija*. Vilnius: Lietuvos Rašytojų sąjunga, 1991, p. 116-117.

one could debate if Israelis or Albanians make 'better' Europeans. The confusion about what constitutes Europe is reflected in the fact that post-Soviet Asian republics are members of the OSCE, and in some cases non-European teams take part in European championships. The on-going enlargement of the European Union further complicates the formation of a political European identity, since the expanding political and cultural boundaries tend to make the common identity rather elusive.

Finally, even today, the less educated strata of the population, irrespective of age, find it difficult to accept as their own essential elements of Western/European civilization, a fact not supported statistically by selective opinion polls, but proved by the prevalence of Russian pop culture and movies in the electronic media, the modest proportion of the population speaking foreign languages other than Russian and behavior patterns of the population in several post-Soviet republics.

These reservations (and many more can be added) make the very concept of European identity somewhat elusive and superficial. And this elusiveness further complicates the construction of a European identity as a part of the European Union project. With all attention to, and respect for statements from Brussels, the suspicion remains as to whether such a project of social engineering actually exists in shape of a comprehensive programme or strategy. However, an initiative in this direction has been taken by several non-governmental organizations. For example, the Charta of European Identity, drawn up by Europa-Union Deutschland with the participation of Federation for Education and Science and members of the European Union of Journalists, and adopted in October 1995, interprets Europe as a community of destiny, a community of values, a community of life, an economic and social community, and a community of responsibility (Charta 1995).

As in the case of nation-building, European identity and polity are interdependent variables. The top-down process of the European standardization of laws, higher education, procedures, currency and the increasing geographical mobility of the population within the European Union generally follows the lines of nation-building. D. Alexander, the British Minister of State for Europe in 2005, aptly noted: "...what the EU has brought is, for the first time, a common European political structure and framework for managing the previously competitive and unstable relationships between those states." (Alexander 2005).

Strong identities and loyalties are sine qua non for a strong polity (gen-

eral knowledge among nationalists), while a polity, i.e. a state or a union of states, can promote the emergence of such identity. In a multicultural setting, identity building has to take into account local specifics, in the sense that within common, broadly formulated basic principles, different sets of arguments and symbols have to be used and different policies of cultural, psychological and political integration have to be followed in particular countries or groups of countries. In other words, specific European projects, or variations of a master project, are needed for particular nations, if the European project is to succeed.

The enlargement of the EU tends to undermine the European identity and stress the existing cleavage between the Old and New Europe, a division that has come to the surface on a number of occasions. With further enlargement in sight, it becomes increasingly unclear when the European Union will become a stable polity in territorial terms. In terms of identity construction, the life-time of a generation is needed to form a share of allegiance and to provide content for European citizenship. However, if Turkey and/or Ukraine join the Union, then why not Israel, Georgia, Lebanon or Algeria? With the accession of each new member the contents of European identity become increasingly diluted, cultural elements being increasingly replaced by a set of universal, increasingly global libertarian ideas and values. The experience of all empires, with the Soviet Union as the latest case has proved beyond all doubt that *political identity devoid of common cultural heritage is a hopeless project*. It seems to be wishful thinking that European Union identity can be constructed exclusively on liberal values. Such a type of identity is culturally sterile, much like the Euro banknotes. For a feeling of solidarity to emerge, a share of common cultural heritage and cultural symbols is of primary importance. From this point of view, irrespective of probable political and economic advantages, the admission of Turkey at this stage, i.e. before it becomes a secular, i.e. non-Muslim nation of the European type, will definitely mean the end of the European identity project and a return to an enlarged [European?] Economic Community.

### **Language formula for Europe**

Coming to the language-ethnicity-nationalism relational nexus, it seems obvious that a European cultural community cannot be based either on two dozen national languages, or on the mother tongue plus English for-

mula. As of now, there are four main trends for language policies in Europe, viz. (a) neo-Atlanticists support English as the European language of contact; (b) defensive national language activists seek a limited multilingualism of national languages; (c) regionalists and separatists want all languages to get equal status, with hundreds of official languages in Europe; (d) technological optimists believe full automatic translation will be available “soon”, so the political issues will disappear (Treanor 2005). The adoption of all national languages as official ones without using any system of ranking has already launched the largest translation operation in the world, as even the United Nations use only six official languages. English has become global *lingua franca* and its adoption as a second language cannot be expected to contribute to the consolidation of a specific European regional identity. Since the large majority of the population of the EU speak Romance and Germanic languages, French and German have the potential and need be accorded by far more usage space in the European Union. *A three-language formula, including the study of two major European languages (English plus French or German)<sup>2</sup>, alongside the mother tongue, could be an optimal solution.*

The language policies of Belgium, Switzerland or India, to mention but a few cases, prove that such a formula is quite feasible, despite the fact that some small minorities have to master four languages. A three-language formula is adopted at the General Military Academy of Spain, where both English and French are being taught to all students. Goethe-Verlag in Germany has published posters appealing to people to learn English as ‘Number One’ *Weltsprache* (World language) and German as ‘Nummer Eins’ in Europe (Goethe-Verlag). But these efforts are rather exceptional. Although in the EU institutions, English, French and German have been recognized as working languages in 1993, in practice English is prevalent, while French is used only occasionally, and German is practically not used (*Welche Zukunft*). In the EU offices there is a high demand for English native speakers (English...), and the accession of ten new member states has further undermined the positions of French and German as major European languages. President Jacques Chirac reacted adequately as he declared he was “deeply shocked” and walked out of EU summit session in March 2006 in protest against the French head of Europe’s Employer Union making a speech in English (Chirac J.). A French expert on geolinguistics, Roland

<sup>2</sup> German is the mother tongue for 24 percent of the population of the EU French and German are 16 per cent each.



J.-L. Breto, has interpreted *anglicisation croissante des échanges linguistiques* as a consequence of economic globalization, as “cultural imperialism” and “linguicide” that may eliminate less important languages in the course of generations (Roland J.- L. Breto 2000).

### **Coping with nationalism**

Ethnic nationalism remains another major stumbling block on the way to the psychological integration of the EU. This is quite obvious, but at least two remarks need be added. As discussed by Rogers Brubaker (1996: 79-109), the modern regimes in Eastern and Central Europe, irrespective of the degree of political liberalism, are intent on building nation-states, “belonging to the dominant majority”, despite international efforts to establish multiculturalism as a norm for any democratic state. The imagined threat of assimilation or loss of national identity is one of the main causes of Euroscepticism in the post-Communist part of Europe. The other stumbling block, paradoxically, is precisely the multicultural model, or the protection of national/ethnic minorities regime, devised mainly by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe. The new regime, happily ignored by OSCE members in post-Soviet Central Asia and some other regions, inspires minority movements and, as examined by Brubaker, contributes to the nationalist countermobilization of the dominant majorities.

As in all large units, the clash of European and national interests is often inevitable in the process of integration. Financial issues, especially in cases of sharp regional disparities, are a major problem for federal states, as rich regions have to subsidize the development of poor ones. The free movement of labour is bound to produce counterreaction within host states, much like the ‘sons of the soil’ (*bhumiputra*) issue in India and Malaysia. At the present stage of integration, the failure to pursue a common foreign policy is also bound to have a negative impact on the process of European identity formation<sup>3</sup>. As in the case of nation-building, national mass media and schools of member states can play a very important – both

<sup>3</sup> E.g. the agreement between Germany and Russia to lay a pipeline on the Baltic seabed was signed without even informing, let alone consulting, Poland and the post-Soviet Baltic states. Such an action, affecting the interests of the smaller states, predictably caused concern and evoked disappointment in Warsaw and the Baltic capitals.

positive and negative – part in the process of identity construction. As long as European events are reported under the international/world or foreign news caption and the history of Europe is not presented as “our” history in school textbooks, one can hardly expect the emergency of genuine European citizenship.

And finally, for an effective union, its structure needs to be reorganized along federal lines, with the creation of a second (Upper) house, with equal representation of the member-states, and a Lower house, the present European Parliament, with members elected proportionally to population figures. Like in all federations, there should be a clear division of powers between the Union and the states, as well as between the two houses. In order not to incite nationalists, the term “federal” need not be mentioned specifically: after all, there are states which are basically federal but call themselves confederations (Switzerland) or Unions (India, and, with reservations, also Myanmar and the defunct Soviet Union).

These observations, coming mostly from the comparative study of ethnopolitical developments in various parts of the world, add up to the single conclusion that, unless there is a clear and intelligible vision of a united Europe and strong political will to make that vision a reality, European identity is likely to remain the expression of a simple geographical truth, and the European project will occupy a modest place among other Utopian ideas. Global economic and demographic trends considered, this would be the worst of all possible outcomes. However, the economic interests (particularly those of the European big business), the changing global balance of power and a growing understanding of negative alternatives to the European integration provide sufficient grounds for expectations that Europeans will be able to mobilize adequate efforts for the creation of a common European home.

## References

- Alexander, D. 2005. European Identity. Speech given by ... for the Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels. Retrieved on 13 October 2005 from: [www.bririschebotschaft.de/en/news/items/051013.htm](http://www.bririschebotschaft.de/en/news/items/051013.htm).
- Brass, P. 1991. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and comparison*. N.Delhy – Newbury Park (Cal.): Sage Publications, 18.
- Brubaker, R. 1996. Nationalism reframed. *Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe*. 79-109. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Charta of European Identity. Retrieved on 22 September 2006 from: [www.europa-web.de/europa/02wwswww/203chart/chart\\_gb.htm](http://www.europa-web.de/europa/02wwswww/203chart/chart_gb.htm).

- Chirac EU walkout highlights battle of languages. Retrieved on 22 September 2006 from: [www.eubusiness.com/afp/060326035708.iplmw6h](http://www.eubusiness.com/afp/060326035708.iplmw6h).
- Gellner, E. 1964. *Thought and Change*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. English mother tongue only... 1000 European jobs for English native speakers. Retrieved on 17 March 2006 from: <http://www.lingvo.org/nl/2/15>.
- Goethe-Verlag. Retrieved on 22 September 2006 from: <http://www.goethe-verlag.com/poster/index.htm>.
- Kaufman, S. J. Spring 1997. The fragmentation and consolidation of international systems. – *International Organization*, vol. 51, Issue 2: 173–209.
- Roland, J.-L. Breto. 2000. La Supr matie de l'anglais est-elle in luctable? – *Courier Unesco*, No. 4. Retrieved on 22 September 2006 from: [http://www.unesco.org/courier/2000\\_04/fr/doss11.htm](http://www.unesco.org/courier/2000_04/fr/doss11.htm).
- Treanor, P. January 2005. Language futures Europe. Retrieved on 22 September 2006 from: <http://web.inter.nl.net/users/Paul.Treanor/eulang.html>.
- Welche Zukunft f r die deutsche Sprache in Europa? Retrieved on 22 September 2006 from: [http://www.sprachkreis-deutsch.ch/index\\_\\_\\_id%3Daktuelles!artikel&year%3D2004&artikel%3D2435.html](http://www.sprachkreis-deutsch.ch/index___id%3Daktuelles!artikel&year%3D2004&artikel%3D2435.html). See also: *Deutsch in Europa und  bersee –  bersee*. – [www.ids-mannheim.de/pub/abgeschlossen/dseu/](http://www.ids-mannheim.de/pub/abgeschlossen/dseu/).
- Wintle, M. May 2005. European Identity: A Threat to the Nation. – *Europe's Journal of Psychology*. Retrieved on 18 September 2006 from: [www.ejop.org/archives/2005/05/european\\_identi.html](http://www.ejop.org/archives/2005/05/european_identi.html).